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BABETTE

THE STORY OF BABETTE

A LITTLE CREOLE GIRL

BY

RUTH McENERY STUART

AUTHOR OF

"CARLOTTA'S INTENDED, AND OTHER TALES" ETC.

ILLUSTRATED



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By RUTH McENERY STUART.

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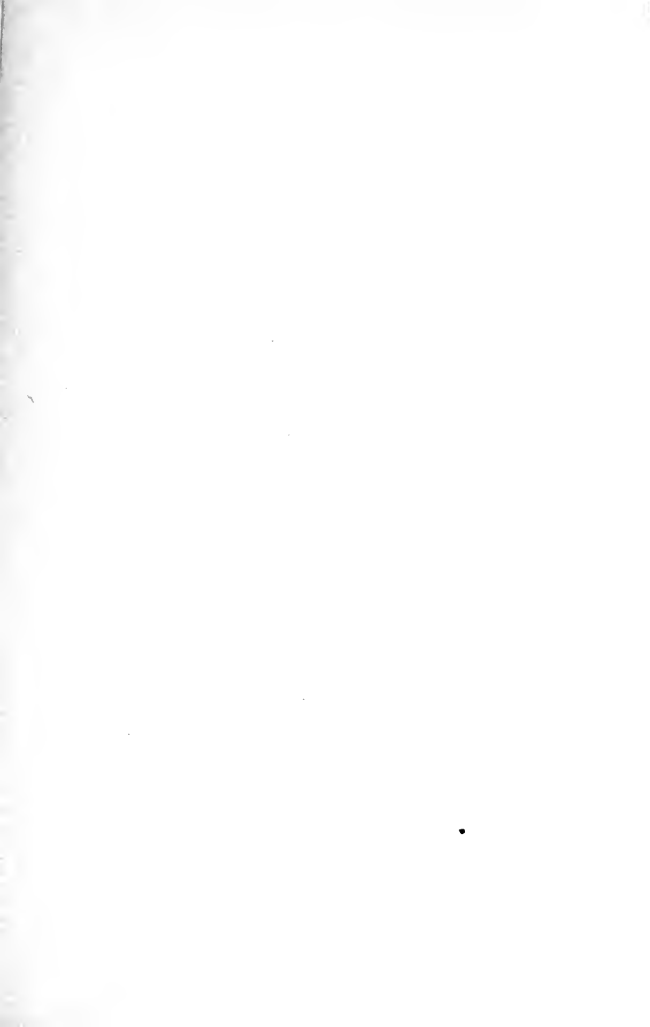
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Affectionately Inscribed
TO THE
LITTLE GIRLS OF NEW ORLEANS
BY THEIR FRIEND
THE AUTHOR

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THE STORY OF BABETTE

CHAPTER I

IT was Mardi-Gras night in New Orleans. Canal Street, as far as the eye could reach in either direction—out towards the river or back in the direction of the swamp lands—was a surging mass of people.

The deep balconies, the *galeries* of the old French town, overhanging the *banquettes* on either side the way, were crowded beyond their strength, and many would have fallen but for the temporary support of heavy timbers put in for the occasion.

Above the heads of the crowds little street urchins, newsboys, beggars, *gamins*—white, black, yellow, brown, and all the shades between—sat perched like chattering sparrows on every available projection of lamp-post or tree, many even clinging about the tops of street-cars. Others, mounting the granite

pedestal of Henry Clay's statue at the corner, steadied themselves by embracing the statesman's legs; while one or two of the more adventurous had even scaled his lofty figure and sat astride his broad bronze shoulders.

The occasional turning of the great electric searchlight in the Pickwick Club building revealed a rippling sea of happy smiling faces along the line of *galleries* opposite, all wearing, no matter what their race or condition, the holiday expression which showed them in touch with the carnival spirit.

On a special balcony, diagonally opposite the searchlight, somewhat nearer the river, so placed that they were often within range of the revolving beam, occupying all but two of the first dozen chairs, sat the good old creole family of the good old creole name of —; let us call it Le Charmant.

The *Maman*, *bonne Maman*, and a round half-dozen of the last generation of little Le Charmants were there—an interesting row, each one a picture—and all as much alike as any row of black-eyed peas—while in the last chair towards Royal Street sat a stately old gray-haired black woman—An-gèle.



"THE LE CHARMANT FAMILY WATCHING THE MARDI-GRAS
PROCESSION"

Her starched *tignon* of gay plaid, rising above her kindly face and standing alert in knot and frill, like ears pricked to listen, gave the impression that her office was that of watch-dog, and the rapid movement of her quick eye along the line, the alacrity with which she pressed back into her chair any one of the children who leaned too heavily forward on the railing, with her quick little bark of alarm "*Assé toi! Tu tombes!*" confirmed the impression.

The bark said, in "gumbo French," "Sit down, before you fall!" but its tone said other things.

It said, "I love these children, and nothing can happen to them while I am near."

A well-dressed, prosperous, and happy-looking line they were as they sat, jabbering and jabbering, sometimes in French—but often in broken English—their best, in polite respect to the Americans among whom they sat.

The great Mystick Krewe had already passed along the street and disappeared, but it would soon come again in another direction.

And so the waiting crowd remained intact, while animated discussions regarding

the comparative merits of this with former pageants filled up the interval of waiting.

The comments of the Le Charmant children were much like hundreds of others who exclaimed enthusiastically in the wake of the mystic wonder.

"Well, me, I think it is the finest Mardi-Gras we ever had!" exclaimed Marie, a little maid of eight.

"What you say, G'an?" she added, as she leaned over the soft lap of her grandmother.

(When 'Toinette—tall, dimpled, beautiful 'Toinette, the eldest, who sits next her mother to-night—first began to talk, she had called her grandmother "G'an," her best effort to please an American nurse, and "G'an" she had been to all the little ones since.)

"Of co'se, 'tis very nice for *now*," granted the grandmother, in reply to Marie's question, "but not like those we had befo' the war, no!"

"Oh—h—h!" protested 'Toinette, laughing mischievously. "G'an don't find nothing nice that don't come before the war. Anyhow," she added, roguishly, "I think me, I am nice, and I was not here before the war. For what you love Babette so much, G'an? She was not here before the war."

The grandmother smiled. "You all nothing but poor trash! I don't love none of you!" she responded fondly, taking little Babette's dimpled face between her own fat palms.

"G'an don't love Babette, no," she added. "Poor lill *bébé*! Mus' grow up an' be her own lill nigger! Before the war, when God send gran'ma one lill *bébé*, He always at the same time send one lill nigger to wait on him. Ask Tante Angèle! She tell you!"

The black woman laughed softly.

"Yas, 'tis true." The *tignon* nodded. "Wait we come home, I tell you."

"No, tell it now," Marie insists; and so the old woman begins:

"Well? You want I tell it now?"

"W'en yo' oncle Adolphe come, in t'ree munt come my boy, Jean, an' den, w'en yo' aunt Natalie is born, I got de nex' day my *Sophie*—*Sophie*, she stay wid yo' aunt Natalie in Paris now—an' den come yo' aunt Fifine an' my *Rosa*—an' after *Rosa* I got *Mathilde*, an' *Mathilde* she die, an' yo' gran'ma she got—lemme t'ink, how dat come—oh, yas, yo' gran'ma she got *yo' aunt Marie*, an' den yo' oncle *Aristide*—an' dat same very day yo' oncle *Aristide* is born come my two

black tween, Louis an' Louise—an' den we ain't had no mo', w'ite nor black, for five year, an' den yo' *maman* is born, an' de nex' St. Joseph night my Cora, po' chile— Now Cora, she is gone, ole Angèle have to start again, play nurse."

The old woman had gone over this same record a hundred times before, but she never wearied of the recital.

"But," she continued, tightening her arm about the little one next her, "so long Tante Angèle can hol' out, all doze chillens got one nigger anyhow. But she make 'em min', yas! Befo' de war I used to b'longs to you all w'ite folks, now you all b'longs to me. All doze no 'count lazy w'ite chillens b'longs to me. All but Babette; we have to let gran'-ma have dat las' li'll lagniappe *bébé*. Better han' me dat cake-bag, yas. Lemme hol' it—or pass it at yo' *maman*, so. Too much dem cream pauf is bad, yas."

During this long recital, although the two oldest children had perhaps paid small heed, four pairs of eager black eyes were never withdrawn from the speaker's face. To them Tante Angèle was an oracle, capable of producing anything at will, from a wonder-tale laden with shivers and starts to a lullaby so

soft and sleepy that not a child of the six had ever heard the very end of it.

Though all the babies had been the grandmother's favorites in turn, Babette, doubly endeared to her as her own namesake and godchild, and, too, by a delicate babyhood from which she was just emerging, was the very apple of her eye.

The blue silk cord and tassels which she wore about her chubby waist, in token of certain religious vows of consecration, were the work of the grandmother's loving fingers—"the last work for my old eyes and hands," she had said, as she laid the silver knitting-needles away with her discarded jewels to keep for "'Tite Babette."

But into this last little love-task she had interwoven, with a feeling of pious devotion, dainty copies of special prayers, invocations to preferred saints in behalf of the tiny wearer, with her full name and date of vows assumed, printed on fine silk paper doubled so as to form the bodies of the ornamental tassels, which were finally skilfully covered over and over with a dainty silken web of blue. This was a secret which only the grandmother and the saints themselves were supposed to know, and when she had

taken the beautiful finished work to the old French cathedral to have it blessed, according to custom, she felt that it carried assurances of other blessings than even the holy father knew.

As they sit in line on the crowded gallery to-night awaiting the return of the Mystick Krewe, Babette sits next her grandmother jabbering as fast as her lips can move, to the infinite delight and amusement of the entire family.

It is the little girl's first view of the grand parade—the first night in all her young life, in fact, that eight o'clock has found her out of her little lace-canopied crib. It is nine now.

She had begged to come—begged, with a little quiver playing all around the dimples in her cheeks while promising in quavering voice to stay awake. And Tante Angèle—Tante Angèle, who was always on the children's side in everything—had plead for her, even volunteering to carry her all the way home in case she should go to sleep.

And then the grandmother had decided the matter.

“Never mind. She is coming with *nénaine*. You look after your own sleepy-heads. I'll

take care of my baby; and if they don't look sharp, she'll talk over the snoring heads of Marie and Arthé, and maybe three nine-o'clock babies. Clothilde, she make friends with the sand-man every night time the clock is on the nine strike—so look sharp!"

It was a long time before the procession came again, and the grandmother's prophecy seemed likely to come true. Marie and Arthé had grown suspiciously quiet and still, and Clothilde, ten-year-old Clothilde, was actually nodding. Only three times, though, the bobbing head went down before a fresh hum of voices lifted all sleepy heads as if with a sudden shock.

Then there was a restless movement on all the galleries—a concerted bending forward of bodies and inquiring questions: "Which way?" "Where?" "Who says so?" "Oh, pshaw!" "Nothing but a crazy lot of smarties trying to raise an excitement."

But no! A sudden hurrying and scurrying, hither and thither, of the now loud-laughing and talking crowd afoot; now two or three mounted police slowly, carefully clearing the way; and now—a *blaze of light*! "Ah-h-h-h!" "Oh-h-h-h!" "Ah-h-h-h!" The exclamation passes like a great wave from

one gallery to another, until its echoes are drowned by the stirring music of the band.

The Krewe has come again. The first float passes; another, and yet another, and still they come, until—what is this? Bows, hand-kisses, a shower of candies—real French *bonbons*—from the merry maskers of a special car over the shoulders and into the laps of the little Le Charmants!

They were all wide enough awake now! And here they come again; and once more—*dragées*, marsh-mallows, “kisses,” crystallized figs, thrown backward this time, for the float has passed, and still they fall with true aim into the hats and over the faces of the now merrily laughing and waving group. Other candies were flying in other directions to other people, or to anybody; but these came by evident intention to the little creoles.

Float followed float, and presently the procession was only a pillar of fire moving slowly out Canal Street, and soon even that was gone; and Mardi-Gras, the mad festival, excepting to such as followed the maskers into theatre and ballroom, was over—over for another year.

The Le Charmant father, we have noticed, was not visible to-night. Like many fathers,

husbands, brothers, and beaux, he was suddenly "called off on business" on Mardi-Gras evening. If they are called to render loyal service to Comus, is not this the "business" of the occasion? Who says they tell stories? Of course, no one knows who compose the Mystick Krewes. This is half its mystic charm. One may suspect things as much as he chooses, and even feel personally satisfied that certain facts are true; but that is not *knowing*.

The little Le Charmants looked very wise and mysterious this evening, when their *maman* said, as they sat waiting for the crowd to disperse: "Well, me, I am satisfied!"

"And I know for what you are satisfied!" exclaimed Toinette, chuckling and winking slyly.

"And me, too, I know!" added another; and, in a stage whisper, "You *regognize* somebody!"

Then all the children gathered closer about the mother—there was plenty of standing-room now—begging her to tell which one was "popa."

"I t'ink, me, he was one of doze apple," suggested Tante Angèle, aside to Marie;

"biccause it was one apple what t'row doze *bonbons*!"

"*Mais*, one *grenade*" (pomegranate) "threw more *bonbons* than the apple," said wise 'Toinette; "and, besides, I am sho'—*sho'* 'twas not the *grenade*, because *popa* is mo' littler than that *grenade*."

"You are all wrong!" The mother was assorting bonbons in the palm of her left hand, and passing to each her favorite candy—"You are all wrong! 'Twas not one of those who threw *bonbons*. You don't catch your father so easily. He thought he could fool me. *Mais*, I know him! Here, pass those gum-drops to Angèle, Marie."

"T'ank you, ma'am. You see dem mardigras dey know po' ole Tante Angèle ain't got no teet', an' dey put in some sof' gum-drop for her." The old woman chuckled lightly as she slipped one of the yielding confections between her own lips, and, reaching along the line, distributed the other three in like manner to the three little ones.

"You know, always," the mother was continuing to explain, "when your popa finds something very droll, he always make *so*!" She rubbed her palms together and shook her shoulders—"Il fait toujours comme ça."

The children all recognized the imitation.

"Well, when those oranges and *grenades* and apples threw *bonbons*, I saw one fat lemon r-rub his hands like that, and shake himself *comme ça*."

Another representation of the movement. "Ah-h-h! He thought he was able to fool me. *Mais, I know him!*"

Even the grandmother and Tante Angèle joined delightedly in the children's glee over the discovery.

The procession had represented "The Five Senses," and it was from the fruit-laden float following in Ceres' train that the show-er of candies had come.

The sense of taste had been elaborately illustrated by a great profusion of such things as delight the palate.

While from one float animated mushrooms, asparagus, and common vegetables without number bowed and waved to admiring multitudes, another was alive with reeling bottles, staggering demijohns and glasses, while on a third were gleeful figs, waddling water-melons, frisking cantelopes, and a rollicking lot of oranges, lemons, and smaller fruits.

It had been a gorgeous pageant, but it was gone. And now for getting home.

The Le Charmants had ridden up to Canal Street in the street car. The family carriage would not hold all. The car came nearly to the door. It was so much more jolly to go out into the crowd. To get from the balcony to the car now, however, was no small matter.

The gallery back of them was quite deserted when they finally turned, a miniature procession in themselves, to take their chances with the rabble.

The mother takes the lead, and as she hesitates a moment in the street door below, the corner light falling upon her reveals a face of remarkable beauty. She is so pretty — so bright and happy and young — and as fresh and blooming as the two lovely daughters, who take an arm on either side while they start out three abreast.

So they lead the way, all three calling out in a breath to the others to keep together — and, funnily enough, by a common impulse they all say it in French.

Why not? The most rigorous politeness would not require one to conform to the speech of passers-by.

The language is catching, and in a twinkling the entire column are chattering like so

many magpies, excepting that the soft voices and liquid syllables of the musical tongue would put all talking birds of the earth to shame.

"We ought to have waited longer," the grandmother says, as the mother, slipping on a bit of banana-peel, embraces her neighbors promiscuously a moment, and then, recovering herself, starts on laughing.

The crowd seems really to be growing more dense again as the galleries pour their masses out front doors to supplant car and carriage loads going in all directions.

Tante Angèle has special charge of little Arthé, whom she holds tightly aloft while she whispers marvel tales into her ear to keep her awake, or to engage her in laughing at the drowsy gait of the two next older, who she declares to be walking in their sleep, and who, indeed, in their constant denials of all sleepiness, are barely saved from stumbling.

The grandmother insisted on keeping Babette's hand. And so they go on.

Good-humor is the rule of the American crowd, and the air of the Southern carnival is seldom torn by a harsh word. And so tonight, when suddenly a loud voice shouted "Move back!" and the tall form of a police-

man loomed up before them, the surging crowd, gasping first as with a single breath, and shrinking backward involuntarily upon itself, became in a twinkling a scene of panic.

Some one—a woman—had fallen across the curbing, and others were stumbling over her. Farther back a dozen or more, jammed against a show-case, were terror-stricken at the combined dangers of broken glass and threatened suffocation.

A little woman, holding in her arms a year-old baby, threw it, in her fright, to a tall man several feet away, and he held it safely aloft while the youngster, apparently taking the whole thing as a joke, roared with laughter.

After the first rush upward from Dauphine Street, increasing the peril, the curious suddenly took fright.

An opening now appeared at the corner.

The victim of the accident, happily more frightened than hurt, went off limping and laughing.

The tall man with the baby, seeing over the heads about him that the accident had not been serious, called now playfully for some one to claim his charge.

The little mother, unable to hold her own

in the crush, had been pressed some distance back, and it was perhaps a full minute before she could make herself heard.

The spirit of fun was in the air. The tall man was as full of it as the rest, and seeing that the mother had not instantly come forward, he forthwith began a mock auction. "Who wants to buy a baby? How much am I offered for a baby? How much for the baby, clothes and rattle thrown in? What am I offered? Ah-h-h!"—seeing the mother's two slender hands raised some distance away—"how much, ma'am? A thousand thanks, you say? Ah, well— Sold!" This, as the youngster, who begins to whimper at sight of his mother, is restored to her grateful arms.

But in this din and confusion what has become of our merry creoles? Were they standing with the others around the tall man, laughing at the baby auction? Surely they were not over in the show-window jam, or—look! Perhaps they are yonder, scarce twenty feet away, where people are running and some one is calling for water.

Yes, we have found them.

The grandmother, overcome from the pressure and lack of breathing-space, has fainted.

She lies unconscious in old Tante Angèle's arms.

The children are frightened and crying. Their mother, chafing the old lady's hands, begs the people to move back, while a stranger, with well-meant brutality, deluges the sufferer with cold water.

The faint is not very serious. It does not last long. After a few moments, moments of much distress and confusion they are, she is able, with the aid of a kind stranger who has bribed a hack-driver from the door of the theatre near, to enter a carriage and start home.

The mother follows, taking the eldest two of the daughters with her (the grandmother might be taken ill again, and she would need them), and hurriedly giving the driver her address and calling to Tante Angèle to "bring the children home," she closes the carriage door, and they are gone.

Poor old Tante Angèle! It seemed a simple thing to "bring the children home," and yet, suddenly relieved of the terrible strain which no one had realized, she gazed about her as one dazed.

The shawl about her old shoulders was wet and cold, and she shivered. Perceiving

it, little Marie took off her own wrap and would have placed it around the old woman, but it was quickly replaced and securely pinned. But the incident seemed to revive her consciousness of the situation, for she exclaimed, in French :

“Come, come! All of you! Come Louis, Marie, Arthé, Babette! Where is Babette—ou est 'tite Babette?”

The little one was, indeed, nowhere to be seen. It had all been so sudden—the rush, the grandmother's fall, the panic.

“Tell me—*dites moi!*—where is Babette? *Ou ma bébé?*” she continued to cry again and again, staggering visibly as she peered in all directions for the missing child.

No one remembered seeing her since she had been toddling at her grandmother's side.

No matter what might happen afterwards, for the moment she was lost. For the length of a block or more in all directions the way was clear now.

The old woman stood fixed a moment, then, crossing herself, while with moving lips she held her face heavenward, she threw up her arms and fell with a heavy thud upon the pavement.

CHAPTER II

WHEN presently Tante Angèle groaned and tried to raise herself, her first words showed the grief that came with returning consciousness.

"*Ah, pove piti!*" (poor little one), she moaned. "*Et li si joli! Ou li?*" (And she so pretty! Where is she?)

"*Ah, mo lasse!*" (I am tired), she added, wearily, as with a difficult effort she rose to her feet.

One glance at the weeping children seemed to restore her to full strength, however, and, turning to the strangers who had gathered about her, she besought them to find her *bébé*.

For a long time the little terror-stricken group lingered at the street-corner, hoping against hope that Babette would suddenly reappear quite near them, or that they would discern her little figure, lost only for the moment, among straggling passers-by.

Occasionally a policeman would stop only

to assure them "There was no occasion for alarm. It was foolish to cry and grieve; children were lost every day—and found. Much better for the old woman to take the others home than to stand in her wet clothes and take her death of cold."

But to all such suggestions Tante Angèle would turn a deaf ear. To go and leave her "*chère bébé*—maybe in a gutter, or all mash under a cart-wheel"—that she would never do.

It was nearing midnight now. The clocks had struck ten long before the accident, and more than an hour had passed since.

Finally the old woman moved to go, and, followed by a crowd of sobbing children, she led the way, moaning softly as she went, a few steps beyond the next corner.

Hesitating here a moment, as if she had not courage to go on, she threw herself down upon the front steps of old Christ Church, and wept unrestrained, swaying her body to and fro in her great sorrow.

Here her wails attracted the passers on foot, who hesitated, asked a few questions, were "sorry," "hadn't seen anything of her," and passed on.

Carriages rolled by, a brilliant line, bring-

ing their rustling burdens — ladies in diamonds, silks, and laces—to the grand Mystick Krewe ball in the old Varieties Theatre next door.

Little Arthé had gone to sleep on Marie's lap. The others by turns wept and entreated the old woman to go home, but for once in her life she seemed oblivious to their present discomfort.

The stone steps where they lay were wet and cold, and these tenderly-reared children unused to late hours and exposure. All thought of the present, however, was swallowed up in the sorrow that was wringing her faithful old heart.

Presently little Arthé coughed in her sleep—a metallic, croupy sound. Rallying instantly, Tante Angèle, hastily lifting the sleeping burden in her arms, and saying only "Allons!" (let us go), started towards the Rampart car.

Her old hands trembled so violently that it was with much difficulty that she finally secured the car-fare, closely tied in a corner of her kerchief. During the long ride home she sat silent—a pitiful wreck of the placid, trig, dignified figure who sat on the gallery only a few hours ago. Her *tignon*, saturated

with water, lay limp and flabby. The watchdog's ears had fallen.

When at last they left the car she staggered visibly, but waiting and carefully helping each one out and sending them ahead, she followed with her heavy burden. The front gate stood open, and the family were anxious and excited when the group entered. The father had come home some minutes before, and, not finding them, had hurried back to make inquiry. He had not yet returned. A shout of delight greeted the wanderers as they entered the hall-door, Tante Angèle still staggering pitifully behind.

Laying the sleeping child down upon the hall lounge, she sank beside her upon the floor, while a chorus of children's voices made the tragic announcement :

“Babette est perdu !”

“Babette—perdu !”

“Babette is lost !”

“—— lost !”

The mother, naturally turning to Angèle for explanation, rushed forward with an agonized scream ; but when she reached the lounge, she started stricken with a new terror.

Reclining as she had fallen upon the floor, her arm still under the head of the sleeping

child, her own head fallen back until it rested on the same pillow, poor old Tante Angèle was at rest. For the first time in her long service of half a century she had been told to "bring the children home," and she had not been able to obey. She was too old to reason about it—to hope with an almost certainty that the little one would be found—to realize that she was blameless. The mother, in an agony of fear, raised the dark arm, trying to rouse her, but there was something in the noble old face that said it was too late.

Tante Angèle could not look in her face and say, "Your child is lost." She was at rest, without sickness or pain or knowledge of parting—simply at rest.

So, tenderly and painlessly, does the All-Father sometimes take old and tired people out of weariness and trouble when life becomes too sad and hard to bear.

And we say they are "dead."

A faint gleam of day was shining across the river when Colonel Le Charmant drove, for the third time, to the door of the police-court opposite Jackson Square to inquire for tidings of his lost child.

He had gone in haste to Canal Street, to



"BARETTE IS LOST!"



the corner where the accident occurred, where the carriage had left Tante Angèle and the children, hoping for news of them ; but seeing no one, he was turning away when an apothecary who was answering his night-bell called out to him, asking if he had found his child. Surprised to learn that the father knew nothing of the affair, he handed him a written description of the little girl, together with her name and residence. This he had gotten from the policeman.

The Frenchman's hand trembled as he returned the paper, and, turning away, he hastened to the various police-stations of the city, at several of which he found notices similar to that of the corner apothecary. To each he hastily added a promise of reward to her finder, and so the remainder of the night passed.

When, for the third time, he stepped out of the court facing Jackson Square, his heart sank. It was the same story—no news. He felt that he must go home, and yet he dreaded to meet the family. There was a bare possibility that the child might by this time be comfortably sleeping in her own bed, and yet, if her finder had cared to restore her, there had been plenty of time before his re-

turn from the ball. The apothecary had told him that the old nurse had gone home sorrowing later than midnight.

The world generally has a tender feeling for little children, and a lost child is almost sure to find protecting arms. Yet how tragic a terror seizes us as we think of the possibility of one of our own little ones—a brother or a sister—being lost in a great city at night. The very thought draws our hearts in sympathy to every member of the Le Charmant household to-night—not forgetting the little child herself, who at best must be bewildered by strange scenes and faces.

It is not hard to understand her father's reluctance to going home without her, and with little hope of finding her there. As he stood, undecided what to do next, a policeman just released from his night work crossed at the corner.

Calling him, and thrusting a coin into his hands, Colonel Le Charmant bade him go to the house and see if there were any news. "You will find me here when you come back," he added, pointing to the open square. The conversation was hurried, and in French.

With hands crossed behind him and bowed head, he now entered the square and began

walking slowly up and down its winding paths. Every few moments he would stop, and absently kick a tiny white shell from the walk with the toe of his patent-leather pumps. He had left notices with all the papers—notified the police. What else could he do? Where search next? For the present there seemed nothing but to wait.

He stopped and looked at his watch. The policeman could not return for more than a half hour. He would have time and to spare to step across into the French market and take a cup of early coffee.

For many years, an hour later than this, Tante Angèle had brought his morning coffee to his bedside. A soft tap at his door, a noiseless step on the carpet, a freshly-turbaned head appearing under the mosquito-netting, and a low-voiced greeting:

“B’jou Miché” (Good-morning, sir), had been her daily salutation, never varying during all the years; and while “Miché” supped his tiny cup of black Java coffee, she had waited, tray in hand, while in monosyllables she reported the state of the weather.

“Fait chaud ce matin” (It is warm this morning); or “Il fait mouiller” (It is damp).

So the noiseless step and the silver tray

went from room to room until, her round complete, she would toast her old toes at the nursery-grate and peacefully sip her own coffee, poured from the same pot.

Then, if the weather and her rheumatism agreed, she would steal off to mass in the little chapel near; or, if the wind were from the east, she steadied her elbows on her knees, said her beads, and nodded until it was time to wake the children.

The light of day was gleaming dimly through its broad aisles when Colonel Le Charmant stepped into the market, and as the tiny orange-colored gas-jets down the aisle went out, one by one, he started to realize that another day was really begun.

Little Babette had been lost for an entire night.

As, his coffee finished, he turned away, there were many in all directions who nudged one another, and, pointing to the man in ball-costume, whispered mysteriously. The news of a lost child travels fast.

When he returned to the square he found the policeman waiting. A single glance at the man's face answered the question that arose to the father's lips.

There was no news of the missing Babette.

The more alarming the real situation, the more need of courage, the greater his resolve to treat it lightly. He must go home and help his family to look at the matter "sensibly," while they waited for the good news the day must surely bring.

The notices in all the papers would find their way into homes in even the most remote precincts. Surely a few hours more of anxiety at most would end the terrible strain, and then there would be a good laugh. If poor people brought her, they should be well rewarded; if her rescuer were rich, he should be royally treated. No man who served a *Le Charmant* was ever forgotten.

When he arrived at the house, it was crowded with the extensive family connection. A servant had run with the news to one house the night before, and by morning a host of uncles, aunts, and cousins—cousins to the third and fourth degree—overflowed broad galleries and steps.

The news of *Tante Angèle's* tragic death had not reached the distressed man, and as, on entering, he caught sight, through the nursery door ajar, of the familiar symbols of death—the lace-covered bier and burning candles—he rushed into the room, crying, "My

child is dead!" But when he saw the placid countenance of the faithful old nurse and learned the pathetic story, he turned away with bowed head—silent.

This tragedy seemed to lend a horrible reality to the other sorrow, and he found it hard to speak the words of courage and cheer which he had intended to bring.

The day passed—another and another—a week—a month—and still no news came. The rewards offered through the daily papers grew with each insertion, until a fair fortune lay at the demand of him who should bring home the lost Babette.

And yet there was no clew. Manifestly she had been stolen. Dreadful words! and still what else could be the truth?

Once a tiny blue slipper was found on the wharf whence a French ship had just sailed. It corresponded nearly in description with those the lost child had worn. Who could say that it was not hers?

It was sent to the Le Charmant home, compared with all the little shoes the child had worn—shoes wet with loving tears, of which even the stray blue slipper had a generous share—and put aside as being a doubtful and uncertain witness.

Still, cable despatches of inquiry greeted the vessel on landing on the other side, but without result. The grandmother grieved in silence, and never left her room. The mother walked her floor with sorrow and tears, and in the smiling faces of the children at home seemed to see only reminders of the lost. Sorrow now wrote, with indelible pencil, deep lines for all the years time had forgotten to record. She grew restless and nervous. When it rained, she sat within her window and wept, fearing her *chérie* might be somewhere out in the wet.

If the sun shone warm and bright, maybe the dear child was taking a fever. A suddenly-slammed door made her start, and soon silver strands began to glisten among the dark, wavy locks upon her temples.

A terrible dark cloud had settled over the Le Charmant home. Let us hope it had a silver lining, and that we may soon get a glimpse of its bright side.

CHAPTER III

A YEAR passed. And now, out of one dark cloud another began to emerge.

The blooming, handsome mother of twelve months ago had grown pale-faced, sad, and silent. The doctor advised a change of scene.

"Go across the lake for a while," he said; "breathe the fresh salt-sea air, and get back the roses into your cheeks."

But at the bare mention of the lake she shuddered. Everything there in her summer home would remind her of the lost child—every breeze from the sea awaken recollections of the last season spent there with the delicate baby—the lost Babette.

The old doctor, during all her life a personal friend as well as family physician, took Colonel Le Charmant aside and advised him.

"We have remedies for nearly all human ills," he said, sadly, "but your wife's complaint is not named in our books. She has a broken heart. If she remains at home, growing paler as the weeks go by, I cannot

answer for the result. Take her away. Cross the ocean. Don't say you can't go. She must go. She will not go without you. You must make a business trip. She will follow you. It is the business of your life—and mine—to get her well. I order you to go."

And so—all in a three-minute talk, without previous thought or arrangement—it was decided that the Le Charmant family would go to France. The very thought of preparing for so great a change drew the sad woman somewhat out of her grief; and as she began to go about, arranging household matters, deciding and directing all the detail of packing, the children were delighted and said, "*Maman* is getting well."

The handsome residence at Pass Christian was sold. The city home would be closed and left in care of a trusty negro servant.

The kind-faced little French priest, old Father Philippe, came often in these troublous days, offering Christian consolation and advice, and promising to keep eyes and ears constantly and watchfully open for news.

"The good God knows best," he would say. "Perhaps He is trying your faith, and when you can say, 'His will be done'—who knows?—you may have your little one again."

But the time had not yet come when the broken-hearted mother could bow in submission to this great sorrow. After a month of preparation—a month into which so many things were crowded that it seemed scarcely a week—the day of sailing came. The children had all paid a last visit to Tante Angèle's grave in the old St. Louis cemetery, leaving tributes of love in fresh flowers and a beaded wreath of elaborate design. "The flowers will soon fade," they said, "but the wreath will keep till we come back."

They would remain abroad about a year, so the father said. But a year is long and brings many changes—and France is far away. It was in June, that heavenly month of perfect days, that they sailed. Even the sea seemed in sympathy with the gentle spirit of the low-lying peaceful shore on the fair day when they rode through the shallow mouth of the great river upon the bosom of the deep waters.

As the mother sat, sad and silent, upon deck, gazing with tear-filled eyes at the receding shore until it seemed only a low cloud, then a line of gray mist, ere it melted quite away into blank space, her heart was filled with sad misgivings. Was she moving farther

from her lost child with each breath of the panting ship, or might she hope to meet her in the distant land to which she was going?

While the vessel sails away under fair June skies, the mocking-bird, unconscious of the sorrow that has closed its doors, sings his merriest song in the orange-tree at the Le Charmant home, and bright butterflies flit over the flowers on Tante Angèle's grave and light upon the beaded wreath that sways easily in the sunny breeze.

But little Babette! Where is she?

Did any one notice a tall dark figure, wrapped in a heavy gray shawl, following close behind the Le Charmants on Mardi-Gras night? Surely not. Who in this merry festival would think of watching a quiet old woman in a gray shawl?

Over on the beach beyond Lake Borgne, hence "across the lake" from New Orleans, less than a hundred miles distant as the crow flies, on the north shore of Mississippi Sound, shown by tiny dots on the maps and some not represented at all, are the little summer towns that for many years have been the season's resorts for thousands of New Orleans people.

But a few years ago the only approach to these sea-shore villages was by boat, going two or three times a week until the midsummer travel demanded a daily trip. Now a railroad, taking them all in on its way to Mobile and beyond, has lifted all these summer towns, as well as the dense woodlands between them, from obscurity into the world.

Conspicuous among the winter residents scattered along this coast are the Italian fishermen, who try to save enough money from their summer trade to support their families in poverty and idleness during the cold season. The more enterprising enter the winter fish and oyster trade with New Orleans, but many prefer to lounge about their huts, drawing the seine often enough to keep the wolf from the door, and spending more of the summer's earnings for tobacco or poor whiskey than for bread, and more for garlic and red-pepper than for butter.

Hidden, whether by intention or accident, in one of the most wretched of these sea-shore dwellings, removed by a closely-wooded beach of several miles from any other human habitation, lived in squalid poverty the miserable family of the Italian, Nicholas Nicholas. In a dense clump of oaks, somewhat



"DID ANY ONE NOTICE A TALL FIGURE WRAPPED IN A HEAVY
GRAY SHAWL?"

back from the shore-line, his low-shedded shanty sat flat upon the ground like a sitting hen with extended wings.

This miserable hovel, for his family's sake, we shall call a house. It would seem a desecration of that holier word to call it a home. And yet it was all of home that its occupants had known for years—all that the numerous brood of children who had first beheld the light of day through its two doors had ever known.

Nick's wife had once asked to have a window, so that when the weather was cold she could see to mend the fish-nets or to string pepper-pods; but Nick had only sworn and muttered something about "forgetting her raising," which cruel speech silenced her.

The meaning of his unkind reply we shall soon see. The window was never made.

But when our story takes us to this poor little dwelling, the question of doors and windows is a small matter; for in June who would stay within doors on the shore of a Southern sea?

The net stretched out to dry in front of the cabin shakes in the gentle breeze, and the green of the pines along the beach is fresh and tender. A black-eyed baby, crawling off

the heavy gray shawl spread for him upon the beach, rolls over and over in the warm sand, crowing with glee, while a group of older children raise their short skirts and wade knee-deep in the salt surf.

Another child, similarly clad, brown and handsome like the others, and yet with a difference—they are all beautiful—sits apart from the others, and gazes with thoughtful eyes out towards the sea. A bit of an old shingle lying at her side beside a deep hole in the sand shows that she has been playing in child-fashion, digging wells one minute to fill them the next.

If the wind sighing in the pines sings a sad story to-day, and its plaint is all in a minor strain, it has not found its key-note in earth or sea or sky, for it is one of June's matchless days. It is the day on which the *Le Charmants* are setting sail for Europe.

We can almost fancy that the sea-wind gathers its notes from the heart of the sorrowing mother who sits gazing wistfully over the vessel's side, and wafts the sad chords into the forest; while the towering pines above her head catch and translate into sound the wistful look in the deep dark eyes of the beautiful child who sits apart from the

others silently watching the sea. This is but a fancy, and yet, following it, we may imagine that it is the meeting within the forest of these two answering strains that produces the sad but harmonious wail that charms the ear of the little child who only knows that she loves to sit and listen.

Need we say that this little one is Babette? If her people, straining their eyes from the departing vessel, could see her to-day, they would not know her. Dressed in a shrunken gown of checkered flannel, a red cotton kerchief tied loosely about her neck, with her chubby feet brown and bare, she looks a veritable little "dago," like the rest of the juvenile members of the household of Nicholas Nicholas.

The sea-wind has browned and summer's sun tanned her, and while brightening and deepening her color, they have brought her golden gifts. Vigorous health, such as the loving, watchful care of mother and home had not been able to bestow, has come to her in full measure—the threefold gift of the sun, the balmy air, and the salt sea-waters.

Besides the family whom we have mentioned—father, mother, and children—there were two other occupants of this cottage by

the sea. One we recognize at a glance as the old woman who followed the Le Charmants on Mardi-Gras night sixteen months ago. The other was—shall we say an old or a young man? It was hard to tell; almost as difficult as it was to say whether he was what is commonly called black or white. As a matter of color, though a pure Caucasian, he was not white, nor was he black, or yet brown, but rather of a leathern hue, with dark blotches over neck, hands, and face.

Two other facts regarding him are apparent, however. He is a mute; this he betrays by mysterious motions of his hands as he ties the boat up to the wharf under Nick's direction. Another fact which we soon discover is that he is mentally weak. "A foolish," Nicholas would say, indicating, by a tap upon his own forehead, the seat of Noute's trouble.

Who this man was, how he had gotten there, what was his real name, and how he had acquired it, were questions that no one ever answered. If Noute himself knew, he could not tell. A few things he did know, and the thing he knew best was *to obey*.

Excepting for an occasional obstinate fit,

which the sinister old grandmother said came upon him at the change of the moon, Noute was uniformly docile. And he was strong of arm, and could row or sail a boat, or draw a heavy seine.

He did not mind being cursed or abused, for curses and blessings were all the same to his unconscious ears; and as for being kicked when Nick was out of temper—or out of whiskey, which amounted to the same thing—well, he was slowly learning to keep out of harm's way. Even if he did get an occasional blow from Nick's boot, what was the difference?

We all have our missions. Perhaps Noute, "the foolish," thought his mission in life was to be kicked. At any rate, he accepted his fate. It will readily be seen that Noute was a most useful member of the family of Nicholas Nicholas.

He could chop more wood within a given time than any other member of the household, and he was a cheap boarder, taking his chances with the rest for daily bread, himself keeping up the supply of fish as well as fuel; and, besides, he was safe—*he could tell no secrets!*

Noute's one extravagance was tobacco, for

which, if he were pressed, he would barter the clothes off his back. His appearance, however, was an obstacle to extensive trade, as nearly all the people along the beach were afraid of him. Added to the startling effect of his blotched visage, which was made more grotesque by a pair of large ears set high up on his head, there was about him that most painful of characteristics, an absence of intellect.

His pale blue eyes, twinkling in a perpetual smile beneath a low-roofed forehead, were more apt to repel than to attract. Strange children, who looked at him shyly askance at first, would run screaming away when he began to gesticulate. The fishermen's wives along-shore regarded him with a sort of superstitious horror, and would turn their faces away and cross themselves if he passed before them.

Some said that he talked to the devil, and with the uncanny movements of his hands was working strange spells; while others, pointing to his spots, whispered of leprosy.

Indeed, the report that poor simple Noute was a leper gained such currency that even those who doubted it feared that it might be true, and kept a safe distance; so that we

may easily see that the family of Nicholas Nicholas was practically quarantined.

It is hard to understand how little Babette Le Charmant, the petted child of refined and wealthy people, could have come into this miserable and most unfortunate family.

The true story, which will explain how and why the poor old grandmother followed our creole friends on that memorable Mardi-Gras night, and will relate all the incidents that led to the terrible deed that brought so much sorrow in its train, will have to form a chapter all to itself.

CHAPTER IV

THE pedigree of Nick's family was somewhat unusual. About twenty-five years before this story begins a certain camp of wandering gypsies had spent a summer on this coast.

Noted for her beauty then as for her ugliness now (for it is the present grandmother of the Nicholas household whom we are describing) was a bonny gypsy maiden of this encampment, and many visitors came from Pass Christian, Bay St. Louis, Biloxi, Mississippi City, and even from New Orleans, ostensibly to have their fortunes told, but really to see the beautiful gypsy girl.

Of course she had many lovers among the humble shore-folk, and it was not strange that she should have chosen for her husband a handsome trifling son of a Sicilian fisherman.

The groom attached himself for a time to the wandering gypsies, but finally he and his Arabian wife drifted back to his father's roof,

bringing with them a little dark-eyed daughter—the present Mrs. Nicholas.

We now begin to see why the little woman was silenced by her husband's reference to her "raising," as a childhood spent in a gypsy camp supplied no memories of such luxuries as glass windows.

She had risen in the social scale to the point of familiarity with hinged doors and plastered walls only through the light of "dago" civilization.

To go back once more: The old gypsy's husband had died while his daughter was yet an infant; and while his people wanted his child, they declared that her mother, a "gypsy tramp," was none of theirs. She must provide for herself. And so continuing, for her child's sake, to live with her husband's people, she contrived, by various little industries, to contribute to the family support. Sometimes, in those old days, carrying a basket dago fashion, she had peddled fish or crabs, or such game as she could secure from the wood, going from house to house; while at other times, after the manner of gypsies, she had turned an honest (?) penny at fortune-telling. Indeed, often the two industries were combined.

So summers went by and winters passed until the gypsy-dago daughter was grown and married.

The groom was as handsome as her own young husband had been, and of the same people; and if the gypsy mother had her misgivings about young Nicholas Nicholas as a suitable husband for her daughter, she was too discreet to express them.

Her husband's family approved the match. Was he not a cousin's cousin from the same loved Palermo whence all their people had come? That settled the matter, and they were married.

Nick may have been an attractive lover, but as a husband and father we have seen that he proved a failure.

After a few years of poor effort he seemed to give up all ambition to care for his family, and at the end of ten years we find them hiding their misery from the world in the deserted remains of an old hunter's cabin, where we first saw them.

But what has all this to do with our little creole heroine, Babette?

We shall soon see.

When the trade of the summers began to slip away from Nick into the hands of soberer

competitors; when the winters began to bring suffering in addition to the usual privations—it became evident some one else must help to keep the family pot boiling—a literal necessity in this case. The mother, with always a babe at her knee and another in her arms, could do nothing to add to the storehouse; and so the old grandmother must start out again as bread-winner. The old woman began to lay plans.

It was too far to walk from their isolated hut to the towns along-shore carrying baskets after the old fashion. If she should take Noute with her, his presence would not invite trade. Besides, there was little chance to pick up an odd penny along-shore during the winter season, unless, indeed, she could visit several small winter hotels and boarding-houses of which she knew. If only she and Noute could patch up the old sail-boat—why not?—they could tie up at the pier-heads at Mississippi City or the Pass, and peddle fish and crabs. She might even try her hand again at her old craft of fortune-telling.

It was done, and the basket that carried soft-crabs, a string of flounders or sheepshead, brought back corn-meal and coffee and flour.

So passed a winter and a summer; but it

was slow living and hard work, and the return of frost brought more pinching poverty.

The old grandmother fell to pondering again. Something else must be done. Why could they not draw the seine on regular days, and try making weekly trips to the city—to New Orleans? It seemed a rash undertaking, and yet boats were going every day—and there was pressing need.

While Noute was not party to the plan, he could obey the old woman's motions. They drew the seine the next day—and the next—and, on Friday following, the little craft made her first voyage to the great city. This was done by following in the wake of other boats at first; but Noute soon learned the way, and after two or three trips the little boat took an independent course, and the weekly sail was an established fact.

Sometimes the little cargo—which the old woman peddled at the big houses in the French quarter, where she soon had her regular Friday customers—would bring unusual profit, and besides the baskets of groceries would come warm stockings for the children or a new gown for the mother; even miserable, unworthy Nick was not forgotten. Noute

took his dividends in an extra share of tobacco.

All went well for a time, but troubles came again. There was jealousy among the regular fishermen, and the old gypsy's ears caught whispers of "selling without a license," and even that startling word "arrest." She returned from this trip with a sad heart—almost discouraged. She could not pay for the required license out of her meagre earnings. She feared to appear again in the streets of New Orleans without it.

The next week the little boat made no voyage, but sat upon the water tied up against the wharf, her brave little sails folded, and her oars crossed like hands at rest in her lap, awaiting orders from the silent crew. But no word came this week or the next.

During this time the old woman was preoccupied and silent, while Noute kept his blinking eyes fixed anxiously upon her, hoping for instructions.

Nick, the father, seldom interfered with any of the family plans now, not even swearing at Noute, so long as he could keep comfortably drunk, which, somehow, he managed to do. He was a good sailor and knew the coast, and the fishermen along-shore some-

times took him cruising to Chandeleur Islands, when, sobering him, they would make use of him, and, setting him on his feet at the end of his service, send him home with money enough to keep him in whiskey for a month or so.

Of Nick's family they knew little beyond the fact that there were a flock of little ones to be cared for, and that they were miserably poor. Mrs. Nicholas never left her home, summer or winter. It was a charity to give Nick an occasional job, even if its proceeds went for drink. This was not so bad as trading away the family provisions, as he had been known to do.

Now the last half of their last strip of bacon hung on its smoky twine against the wall in Nick's shanty, and if he neither knew nor cared that the macaroni-box was empty and the flour getting low in the sack, the grandmother did know and must care; and the plan for relief, which crept into her old head timorously at first—as a thing too shameful to be entertained even by this poor gypsy—gradually took root and strengthened.

Even in her early days, before the light of dago morals had illumined her poor life, the

worst she had done was to gather in dimes at front doors for telling to mistresses the family secrets she had gleaned in their kitchens.

The plan which came to her now was so hideous that she started from her pallet in the lonely shed-room as it dared to come and tempt her. But when the morning brought new suffering, and the knife approached nearer the bacon's string, it came again.

Among her richest customers of the French quarter she had recognized one of the wealthy summer families of Pass Christian. They were "such a so rich peoples!" So the servants had said, rolling their eyes until the color was quite out of sight to express the limitless wealth which words could not convey.

They so rich—and *she so poor*. If she could only—

No wonder she shuddered at the terrible thought. If she could only *steal one of the rich man's children!* He would pay a big reward for her restoration. Money would come in at the door and poverty fly out—up the chimney—in smoke. They would have warm clothing and flour—white, sweet wheat flour—and butter, such as she had tasted on scraps from the rich man's table.

Did she tell her plan? Not even to the moon that looked in upon her wrinkled face through the broken roof that had spoiled the gypsy's daughter, and made her "forget her raising."

Noute danced with glee when the welcome motions told him to prepare for a trip to the city. He loved his sailor's life. It had brought him more wealth than he had ever known—more food, more tobacco. And as for clothes—he almost needed a trunk.

Noute was not mercenary, but he was human enough to feel the pleasure that comes to him who achieves any worthy success. Besides, his new life had added to his personal dignity, making of him several things which he had not been before; for was he not captain and all the crew combined of an independent tramp sailing-vessel? Was he not a well-fed and well-dressed gentleman?

If he was not, he thought he was, and comparing his old self, who had caught cold through the rents in Nick's cast-off trousers, with the new dignitary who rode the sea like a "captain of the line," he was indeed a man of consequence.

If the solitary passenger was nervous and depressed, the captain was jubilant enough

when, hoisting sail, they set out on their momentous voyage.

As the little boat tripped gleefully over the water, and Noute sat grinning proudly in happy possession of honors restored, the wrinkled old woman, turning her back to him, covertly unfolded a little bundle which she carried wrapped in a gray shawl, and, running her eye hastily over its contents, quickly rewrapped it, only to repeat the same mysterious proceeding again and again during the day, as if making quite sure that everything was there as it should be.

The bundle contained a pair of long wool-len stockings, small and old, a shrunken flannel cloak, and faded hood—all half-worn little garments of Nick's children.

The trip was a quick one, and the tiny craft sailed through the mouth of Bayou Saint-John, and up within its banks to a point within easy walking distance of Canal Street, in the early evening of the day they sailed.

Before dawn next morning the old woman set out directly to the Le Charmants' back gate, having first bidden the mute, by a series of gestures, to await her return in the boat. Selling the contents of her heavy bas-

ket was the pretended object of her visit, and the jingle of the coins they brought her delighted her old heart indeed; but this hour in the Le Charmant kitchen must be made to tell. There were some things which she must know, and they were things she could not ask.

The lighter palms of a half-dozen variously colored hands were soon presented for her to read. There was not one of the lot who did not count the old woman a famous fortune-teller.

Listen to the delighted exclamation of one of their number at the gypsy's wonderful revelations.

"*Mais*, I am sho'—*sho'* she is one witch, yas! How she can know all our w'ite people goin' ride in somet'ing wid wheel to-night—to go at dat Mardi-Gras procession? Of co'se doze Dauphine car is got wheel, yas! *Et écoutez*, Celeste! She say dey goin' on one high place. Don't you find Griswold's *galerie*, close by Henry Clay, is one high place? *Mon Dieu!* she make me all scare!"

So the cunning gypsy led them on until they had told all she wished to know; after which she indulgently wove wonderful fortunes for all—fortunes so full of event and



"THERE WAS NOT ONE OF THE LOT WHO DID NOT COUNT THE OLD
WOMAN A FAMOUS FORTUNE-TELLER."



excitement, so colored with sentiment, that everything else became of no importance and was quickly forgotten.

One would grow rich, one travel, one draw a lottery prize; but all would marry, some once, some twice—all happily. What a fortune-teller she was! And how these poor, foolish, ignorant people piled her big basket with good things from the family larder!

Whether the panic at the corner of Canal and Dauphine streets was of the gypsy's planning, or only the accident that helped her terrible crime, is hard to say.

When Babette's little hand felt the grandmother's relax, another closed over it so quickly that she did not notice the change.

Pushing the child gently yet firmly before her, keeping silent, the gypsy hurried as fast as she dared down Dauphine Street.

In the excitement of the hour would any one notice that while an old woman led a handsomely dressed child into the shadow of a dark block, this same woman carried out into the light at the next corner a fretting baby wrapped in a dark, faded flannel cloak?

Had one been curious, he could have satisfied himself, by a glance at the shabbily-

stockinged feet and faded hood, that it was only a tired mother or grandmother carrying her sleepy child home.

While poor Tante Angèle, two hours later, wept and wailed on the front steps of Christ Church, and the lemon saluted the cantaloupe in the old Varieties Theatre next door, Noute the foolish, steering the little boat out Bayou Saint-John, peered and blinked curiously in the darkness at the sleeping bundle in the old woman's arms.

The theft had been a success.

CHAPTER V

IF the sleepy fishermen along-shore had noticed, as the little boat came into sight in the early daylight next morning, that there was a child aboard, they would have taken for granted that it was one of Nick's children. Even had they suspected that a stolen child was hidden somewhere on the coast, they would have guessed that Nick, *last of all*, with already too many mouths to feed, had taken another.

But though excitement ran high over the sad affair in the outer world, it caused not a ripple upon the even surface of the lives of these foreigners of the beach.

But the gypsy kept herself fully informed. She knew just what rewards were offered, and, unfortunately for her plan, she knew the intensity of public feeling in the matter.

Besides the universal sympathy and interest shown throughout the city, the creole population was especially and justly aroused. There were mass-meetings: speeches were

made, resolutions passed. The affliction which had covered one home with gloom became their common sorrow.

"Our children are not safe at our own doors," they said. "We will resolve ourselves into independent police corporations; let every man count himself a detective, and let no one sleep until his neighbor's child is found."

Thus they continued to meet and to make speeches, consistently following them up with earnest, honest endeavor; but no matter how willing, even eager, their hearts, human flesh is weak and grows weary. They slept—and their neighbor's child was not found.

But the thief was frightened. She had formed several plans for returning the child and securing the coveted reward, which had grown dazzlingly tempting, and they all seemed feasible enough *until the time came to execute them*, when each seemed to leave a dangerous loop-hole by which she might be detected. It is true, a clause in the advertised rewards promised "No questions asked;" still, she feared for her life if she should be discovered.

She still made occasional trips to the city, clandestinely peddling her fish, and from the

gossip of the Le Charmant kitchen, to which she always went for a half-hour's gossip, which was more important now than even the coins she gathered there, she got a fair report of the sentiments of the family connection in the matter.

"M'sieu Alphonse say he want to see somebody claim that reward."

"M'sieu Jean, he say his word is passed. W'en dey give him back once more his *bébé*, he is willing to pay. He is pledge."

"*Mais*," insists the first speaker, "M'sieu Louis an' M'sieu Felix an' M'sieu Aristide jump up quick an' say *we are not pledge!* Your reward is money. Ours is *so!*" and she clasped her own neck with both hands. The motion meant that the culprit should hang by the neck.

The wretched old woman did not gain courage by her visits to the Le Charmant kitchen. Many nights she resolved to return the child on the morrow; but the new day always brought new fears, and found her nervous and afraid.

In all her schemes Noute was the direct instrument with which she planned to work. He would be safe. He could tell nothing. He would bring the money.

But supposing he should be killed! He could be easily identified. He would never come back to the boat. She could not go home without him. They would all be ruined. Even if Noute should escape unhurt—if he should bring her the money—his extraordinary appearance would be a clue which would surely lead to her discovery.

A year passed this way and another was begun.

We have seen the changes in the Le Charmant home, and their departure for Europe.

The old woman had never been able to nerve herself to the act that involved so much risk to herself and family, and so the only result of her crime thus far was an added care—another mouth to feed, one more child to clothe—and the loss of her best customers.

Summer and winter passed, and came and went again—seasons of increasing trial and privation for the wretched family of the beach.

Happily, little children often seem to thrive, like wild-flowers, upon those things which come by gift of Heaven—the life-giving, pine-laden air, the blood-warming sun, waters full of healing, and Mother Earth with only good

gifts to such as will inhale her breath, lying prone upon her motherly lap ; upon these, with but a few of the meagrest simples in the way of daily bread, this healthy brood of children grew, as the wild-flowers by the wayside, in richness of tint, strength, and riotous beauty.

If the little aristocrat, Babette, was fairer to look upon than the others, it was because of a certain softness of line and tints, a milder coloring. There was a glint of brown in the deep masses of her flowing hair, whose waving ends the sun had burnished in shimmering rings of bronze. Her eyes were of changing hues, like a midnight sky—not always of one mood.

Her little companions, whose pedigree of beauty was as long as her own, with their sharply-cut cameo faces of clear lines and positive blacks and browns, their straight ebony hair, and lips of coral—ah, they were pretty, too ; pretty, pretty !

And yet in looking at the group, one would, perhaps, accepting each little Italian as a perfect type, pass satisfied to the next. But having seen the radiant Babette, he would look again and again, only to wonder what might be the hidden meanings of so much

depth and suggestiveness — what would be the effect of the next turn of her pretty head. Did those marvellous brown lashes curve or droop? Was she a real human child, or only a sprite? Could one ever get quite near her and touch her cheek, her hair?

To those who may say this is overdrawn, we would ask, "But have you ever seen Babette? No? Ah, well, of course, to you it is exaggerated." "But," says another, "I have seen her, and—"

"What, you have seen her? It is 'not half told,' you say?" But one has only words. What are they to describe a beautiful creole maid of any age from six to twenty? And, then, English words, too—clumsy ponderous English! If one might only do it in French!

Babette had spent nearly three years in this sea-side home—half her young life—and who shall say they were unhappy years?

Could any group of healthy children be unhappy under conditions so rich in opportunity?

No matter how slender the family purse, they were never actually cold or never hungry more than once or twice, for just a little while — such a time as sometimes various



"HER LITTLE COMPANIONS, WHOSE PEDIGREE OF BEAUTY WAS AS LONG AS HER OWN"



well-to-do small people we know are deprived of the thing they wish, for sake of discipline.

The child who goes supperless to bed one night because the flour is out is no more unhappy than he who is sent to sleep hungry for having slapped his little brother, or rolled on the floor in a temper. Indeed, his unhappiness is less, because his hunger is unseasoned with remorse.

It would be hard to actually starve on this Southern sea-coast. One would, perhaps, not prefer to eat fish at every meal—as sometimes it was necessary to do—or to season it with macaroni in lieu of bread, or even, as was more than once the case, with persimmons in place of either.

The fastidious ones had the privilege of taking the fish first in due form, and, omitting the other courses, of finishing the meal, in regular approved style, with fruits. And there were nuts in season—pecans, walnuts, hickory-nuts, chinquepins—and grapes, if you please, not only the wild muscadine, but a dense half-fallen arbor laden with scuppernongs, rusty and brown and juicy and sweet. Somebody, in the old days when the cabin was young—not so very, very many years before—had planted these vines, and made

a rude support of pine saplings for them within a stone's-throw of the hut.

And so there were seasons when this little flock of foragers disdained more than half the meals offered them, even when there was macaroni in plenty—rich, savory, tomato-flavored steaming macaroni—growing fat, like the squirrels and partridges, on the literal “fat of the land.” A very different fare this from the feasting so figuratively called.

And let no one suppose these deprived children were without amusements and toys. “Toys?” says some one—“toys? and sometimes not enough to eat!”

Certainly, toys. What have toys to do with eating?

“But where did the money come from to buy them? Were they second-hand toys?” inquires another.

Ah, now we understand. Bought toys are made especially for the unfortunate city children who have not the real things.

Who would have a shop-made spring-board, for instance, when he could bend down the pliant, perfumed head of a young pine sapling, sit astride a crotch in its shoulders, and spring ten times as high as on any poor man-

ufactured affair—and swing in various directions, too?

What family of children would have one or two spring-boards for an entire family when they could take possession of a tree apiece, and, if such was their pleasure, send them all towards a common centre, so that the riders might greet one another and run races in springing?

What regularly balanced seesaw is half so good as a rough, irregular beam or plank laid across a fallen tree-trunk?—a nice slippery trunk, with all the bark peeled off, that the seesaw shall not be too evenly poised. And there may be accidents—real delightful old-fashioned head-over-heels accidents. Everybody who has ever made the real sort—and unmade them because they were *too* much given to accidents, or *too* pokey and safe—will understand where the fun comes in.

And as to swings? Does anybody suppose our little sea-side children had no swings, because, forsooth, they had not ropes or staples or scaffoldings? Better than rope, or chain, or hammock of twine were their long grape-vine swings, hung in the very best places on the strong arms of the forest trees—some broad enough for two, and oth-

ers just right for one to stand in and sway and sing and keep rising higher and higher, until she could thrust a foot mischievously into the great wheels of cobwebs glistening in the sun, and watch the bright red and green weavers run with all their long legs for their lives, or let themselves down to the ground with ropes safer than any patent fire-escape, spun as they were needed.

And dolls? Of course, dolls. Why not? A store doll with a limited set of machine-acting accomplishments is not to be mentioned in the same day with a pine baby. There is one to be found at the bright green summit of every tiny pine-tree, or at the end of every limb of one not too old and woody. She must be carefully cut just the right length, or height, and the needles plucked from face and shoulders. Then she will stand alone on her fresh skirt of green, while you find some sisters or brothers for her in the same tree, or some cousins from the tree across the footpath. They are just as amusing as corn dolls, and only a little older and more independent in their behavior.

Of course, every country child has played with corn dolls, and knows just when to gather the baby ear from the corn-stalk—

how to take off its cloak of shucks without tumbling or tearing its long robes of shining silk. The corn dolls are very young and helpless, and have to be named and christened, and to be jolted on their *maman's* knees for colic. They very rarely have trouble cutting teeth, or tumble over in learning to walk as the pine babies do.

These are only a very few of the toys with which our little beach children amused themselves. There were numbers of others.

And then there was always the beach—the beach with its delightful warm sand, full of pretty pebbles and shells, its funny creeping things—conchs, snails, and fiddler-crabs—its coming and going tides. What better fun than gathering a lot of conchs, building a high wall of sticks around them, and then watching them walk about in all directions trying to get out, while the little crabs fiddle away, as if keeping time to their steps? One can always catch any number of fiddlers and conchs on this sea-shore; and the game need not be cruel.

Perhaps the best fun is when a few pickets are drawn from the fence, and the conchs, blundering about with their houses on their backs, do not find their way out for a long

time. This is apt to be the case if the opening is made on the shore side of the enclosure. They seem naturally to run towards the water.

A year before the time to which we have come, that is, when Babette was about five years old, something happened which made for her a friend and an enemy. The friend was the humblest member of the household, and the enemy the master of the house; but we shall see which was the stronger. It had been a long time since Nick had given Noute a beating. There had been nothing to provoke it. Nick's one want was supplied in the way we have seen, and the duty of providing for his family had been virtually assumed by the "foolish."

This had been a season of development for even the weak-minded man, and he had dared to bring back empty the demijohn Nick had placed in the boat to be filled, whereupon milord began to use his boot as he had done in the old days. Noute, however, held him strongly at arm's-length, and would have thrown him from him, when—what was this?

The little child Babette, usually so gentle and mild, had rushed in between them, and with a stick was beating Nick over the head

and in the face; and when Nick seized the stick and broke it in her presence, she stood unabashed and defiant, and, cheeks aflame, commanded him to stop. Seeing her stand thus with head erect and unabashed, the miserable drunkard doggedly dropped the rod and sullenly slunk away.

But what had come over Noute, "the foolish"? Great tears were trickling down his scarred cheeks, and, throwing himself down at her feet, he took them in his hands and kissed them, laughing and weeping all the while like a foolish child.

If Noute was a "low-down dog"—Nick's favorite name for him—he had a best dog's best trait—faithfulness; and no dog ever loved a master as this poor friendless creature henceforth loved the little child, who had forgotten even her fear of the drunkard in resentment of his wrongs.

Noute scarcely left the house after this without bringing something to his little queen. The prettiest of his flowered cotton kerchiefs he brought and tied about her neck. Down upon his knees in the sand he fell as he placed it there. Pretty shells from the islands and water-lilies from the bayous he would gather for her, always presenting

them — a queer notion it was of the poor “foolish” — on his knees.

One day, in the summer-time it was, he brought her, in great glee, a mocking-bird in a little wooden cage he had made himself. He took particular delight in this gift, and after formally presenting it, he sat flat upon the ground, blinking faster than ever, to see what she would do.

For a few moments she seemed as delighted as Noute could have wished ; but presently her little face grew serious and troubled. The pretty bird, unaccustomed to the confinement of a cage, was beating its head against the bars, panting and panic-stricken.

Babette, looking sadly at Noute, shook her little head and pointed to the trees. Then she opened the door of the little cage ; and when the bird flew away to the top of the highest branch she laughed and clapped her little hands.

If Noute's first sensation was disappointment, he was deeply impressed with the act. It seemed a sacred thing. The child who had fought for him would not imprison a bird. He sat very still upon the ground for a moment, blinking slowly, as if trying to seize a difficult thought ; then taking between his

hands the cage that had cost him so much labor, he crushed it to pieces and threw it far out into the water.

Babette had given him his first idea of freedom, and with it he became her devoted slave for life.

CHAPTER VI

INSTEAD of being discouraged at the loss of his first bit of handiwork, Noute seemed quite anxious to use his new-found skill in the making of something that should meet with greater favor in Babette's eyes. His only tools were his penknife, a saw, and the hatchet used for splitting the family kindling-wood or chopping into short bits the fat knots of resinous pine.

The planning of this bird-cage had been the supreme mental effort of Noute's life, its execution the master achievement of his hands. So much concerted action seemed a promise of better things. The cage had been a rough little structure, with its irregular slats of split cane set at faulty angles; but it had served its purpose. It had held the bird securely, afforded air and a perch. How much more does the finest gilded bird-prison? To his inexperienced eyes it had been a work of art. He was eager to try



"ONLY A HARD PALE FACE BETRAYED THE DEEP ANXIETY OF HER HEART"



his prentice hand at something else. What would her little ladyship like?

Noute did a good deal of sea-gazing and blinking, and wasted considerable energy in idle whittling before his mind had been able to master a new plan, to think it out clearly, and to go to work with a degree of method; but soon—much sooner than one would think possible, looking at the mechanic, his tools, and materials—there stood at Babette's place at the table such a high-chair as would delight the heart of any little girl or boy in Christendom. Its slender rustic legs and arms were of pine saplings, and across the back was braided, with poor attempt at design, but an evident eye to comfort, a close net-work of willow switches. Not content with leaving as many of the green leaves as possible upon the willows, Noute had stuck its high back full of fresh wild-flowers when he brought it in to present it. Falling on his knees as usual, he placed the chair before him, and, lifting Babette, seated her within it, made a comical blinking bow, and rolled over backward on the ground, laughing with all his might.

If Babette let the other little children sit in the pretty chair, turn about, when Noute

was away, he was none the wiser; but the usurper who was reckless enough to be caught in it in his presence was always instantly dethroned.

Strangely enough, the old gypsy never interfered in any of Noute's exhibitions of partiality to the strange child under her roof. Perhaps it was a faint relief to her guilty conscience to have the wronged little one favored, even in so slight a way as was within poor Noute's power. And so the chair of honor was always accorded to its rightful owner at his demand. And later, when her small pallet in the shed-room was found one day lifted upon a brand-new pine bedstead, the little miss was granted undisputed possession of the imposing bit of furniture.

Noute at some time in his life must have seen better furnishings than the Nicholas home afforded, for the bed he had evolved from such rude materials as he found at hand was of a pretentious pattern, with a crooked little twisted canopy at the head from which to hang a mosquito-net. There was nothing like it in Nick's house—nothing quite like it on the face of the earth, perhaps; but it hinted of a memory of better days—a memory as unsteady and imperfect as the bed,

maybe, but as surely formed after a remote design.

One day in the spring of 1872, while the winds were yet chill and the sunlight faint and weak, Babette came into the cabin at nightfall with bright red spots on her cheeks and an unnatural brilliancy in her eyes. The gypsy was alarmed. She had heard of scarlet-fever and diphtheria in the city. There had, indeed, been a case of the former in the house of one of her customers, where she had spent an unwilling half-hour waiting to make change in payment for her fish. How dreadful if she had brought the dire disease home in her clothing, and this should be but the beginning of new sorrows! Besides, she had always felt a terror lest any harm should come to the strange child under her roof. She was not at heart the criminal she had become through the inevitable consequences of one deliberate act of wrong; and there were many nights when the cares and trials of her old life were rendered tenfold harder to bear through the horrors of a guilty conscience.

The way of the transgressor is hard, indeed. As she sat beside the feverish child lying upon the rustic bed that night, only a hard pale face betrayed the deep anxiety of

her heart. But she said nothing, and on the morrow, having given the little patient a cup of herb-tea and such other treatment as she administered to her own brood on occasion, she stoically started out with Noute to draw the seine, for on the next day they must go to town.

When they returned in the evening Noute missed Babette from the group on the beach, and creeping stealthily into the shed-room he found her sleeping restlessly. When he laid his rough hand upon her forehead, it burned him. All night long he sat beside the sick child, and when morning came, and the old woman, summoning him, pointed to the boat, he sullenly shook his head. He would not leave Babette.

The old gypsy was sadly perplexed. What should she do? The fish and crab baskets were packed, and everything in readiness to start, but the sailor refused to move, and she could not go without him. Finally he rose, pointed to the bed, and then to the boat. He would go if she would take Babette, too. There was no time to be lost in indecision. Heedless of consequences, she hastily wrapped the little burning form in her shawl and laid her in the boat.

During the long hours upon the water Babette coughed loud and often, and when, after nightfall, they landed upon the bank of the bayou, she was evidently so ill that the old woman, fearing that she would die unless something should be done, gathered her into her arms and, bidding Noute stay in the boat until she should return, hurried into the city.

Noute followed stealthily behind. He had no idea of losing sight of Babette.

It was a stormy night, and she had not proceeded far when the rain fell in torrents. For a second time the old woman hurried through the streets of New Orleans with the stolen child. If fear of detection hurried her steps the first time, terror, lest she should die in her arms, hurried her now.

She knew where an old Indian doctress lived, far down in the quadron faubourg, but it was dark, and she could not find her way in the blinding rain; still, she could think of nowhere else where she would dare go, and so she blundered on, hoping soon to reach a familiar locality and find her way. Such was not to be, however. The All-Father, who had raised up a friend for her in the poor idiot, could make the very storm which threatened her life an instrument in

his devoted hands to save it. The storm grew every moment in fury, and yet she trudged on. Suddenly a loud clap of thunder seemed to shake the earth, and the gutters were beginning to overflow. She staggered now as she picked her difficult way along the slippery *banquette*.

Close behind, his soft hat pulled down so as to protect his eyes, walked the poor mute, anxiously watching to see what should become of her little burden—the one thing in the world that he loved.

As the dog forbidden follows his loved master, dodging the expected clod at first, and growing bolder as it does not come, so Noute, fearing detection, kept far behind until, his anxiety growing with the storm, he was soon but a few steps behind.

The gypsy had just waded across an overflowed corner, and was blindly pressing forward, when an old gentleman in gossamer and umbrella rushed past her, and, pushing open a heavy iron gate, hastily entered. Here was Noute's opportunity—an open door, warmth, shelter for the sick child. Quick as a flash he sprang forward, and, grasping her from behind with all his strength, *pushed the gypsy into the open gate*.

While the poor fellow had not speech and but feeble reason, he had strength of arm and devotion, and the open gate with its invitation to shelter nerved him to the act.

Through the gate the old woman sped so suddenly and violently that when she reeled against the old gentleman it would have been hard to say which of the two was the more startled; but before there was time to question there came from the wet burden in the old woman's arms a loud croupy cough. Its metallic ring was an open sesame to the good man's door.

Noute, standing without, trembled with excitement as he peered through the iron gate; and when he saw the old gentleman turn, hold his umbrella carefully over the old gypsy, and carefully help her up the broad granite steps, through the arched hall door, *into the glowing light*, he danced and laughed and wept, all by himself, in the darkness and the rain. Then he ran up and down the square for a moment, as if studying the situation, and, forgetful of wind or rain, hurried away.

It was too late to try to get back to the boat to-night—and too far—so he soon found a snug corner behind an end of an old dis-

carded show-case under a shed, the ramshackle remains of a dilapidated building. Here, in dreams that took their gilding from the glimpse he had gotten into the rich man's door, he spent the night. He had slept too many nights in the old boat at Nick's wharf to care for a little wetting now.

Leaving him to sleep and to dream, let us go back to Babette and the gypsy. The old gentleman who had taken them in was Dr. —; let us call it Bondurante. This, at least, was one of his names.

Before the old woman had time to collect her scattered senses, she found herself in the doctor's comfortable office, and he lost no time in ministering to the sick child. Her cold, damp dress was replaced by dry clothing, and the shivering feet were soon wrapped in warm flannels.

A gentle-faced old lady prepared and gave the medicine, while, in the soft motherly arms of an old colored woman, the little body was slowly warmed back to life. Had she been conscious, and memory faithful, she might almost have fancied herself back in her old home and in the loving care of her grandmother and Tante Angèle.

If, however, she retained any faint impres-

sions of the tender and refined associations of the first three years of her young life, they were for the present overlaid by fresher memories of a very different kind.

Through all that night, as she tossed in her sleep, the names she muttered were those of the beach.

During the first moments after their entrance every one had been so much engaged with the little sufferer that the old woman, sitting bolt-upright in their midst in her wet rags, was for the time overlooked. But now that everything had been done for Babette, they turned, naturally, to the gypsy, and began to question her. But she only shook her head, feigning not to understand. The doctor tried English, French, Spanish, Italian with the same result. *She would not understand.*

And so they discussed freely in French, their own tongue, the condition of the little patient, and the probable occasion of the untimely visit.

"I wish I could make her comprehend how very ill her child is," the doctor said; "she may not live through the night."

The old woman had understood well enough all the way through, and now she was filled with a new panic.

The storm still raged without. One could not send a dog out in such a night as this.

Taking the child from the servant, Madame Bondurante bade the negress, Clarisse, provide some dry clothing for the old woman, and to offer her a bed for the night. The doctor would take personal charge of the sick child.

Obeying her movements, the gypsy followed Clarisse into the hall; then, hesitating a moment, and pointing to the floor, wet from her dripping garments, she indicated, by a twisting movement of her hands, that she wished to wring her skirts, and stepped out upon the porch. When she had gotten safely outside the hall door, did she stop to wring her clothing? Not she. Darting noiselessly down the steps—out the iron gate—into the street—*she ran!* Ran as she had not run for years—as she would never run again!

CHAPTER VII

AFTER running three or four squares, the old woman slipped and fell. For a few moments, as she lay in the wet and darkness, her old head seemed to swim round and round, and she lost all consciousness; but presently, perhaps, the pattering rain in her face restored her senses, for she raised herself and looked around—as one waking from sleep—still half dazed. There was not a familiar object in sight. She was lost. She thought of the Indian doctress as still a possible refuge for herself; but in which direction to turn to find her now she could not tell. Shivering, she finally staggered to her feet, only to fall again; and as she tried, leaning forward on her hands, to steady herself for another effort, the *banquette* around her seemed to rise and fall, like a ship at sea. For some moments she lay still, sick at heart and terror-stricken.

It was still raining, though not so heavily, and through the misty darkness she fancied

that she could descry a dark object ahead. It might mean shelter. While she peered eagerly forward, trying to see more clearly, the clank of a policeman's club sounded, evidently near at hand. Pulling herself together now by a great effort, she crept forward on all-fours, and soon found herself safely under shelter. What it was she could not tell—did not care. And here she slept. Or did she sleep? Her poor old brain was in a whirl—her body tired, tired.

The events of the day were enough to exhaust her; those of the past hour nearly drove her frantic. How had she gotten into the doctor's gate? If she had been forced to say, she would probably have declared that she had been thundered into it. She had no impression of hands having touched her. The result of it all, however, was, in many ways, a relief. If only the people had not seen her!

She had long ago given up all hope of claiming the reward, and had often thought, before the family went away, of slipping the child into her father's gate some night. Her only fear was that some time—somewhere—she might possibly meet her. Babette would recognize her. She was afraid to risk it.

Now the matter was settled. She was sorry to think the child would die, and never get back to her people. And yet, looking at it in another way, she almost hoped she might die. No one would suspect who she was. There would be one witness less.

So one crime leads to another! When she was young the gypsy made up silly fortunes, and told them as true to credulous people for money. She formed the habit of untruth. Thus the terrible crime of stealing a child, for the sake of money, became possible. And now—oh, the horror of it!—she hoped the sick child would die! Murderous wish! And yet the old woman was not at heart a murderer. If she had had Babette at the moment she was wishing she would die, she would have done all in her power to make her well. She was only *a coward*—a coward because of her guilty conscience. It is easy for a coward to become a criminal—simply because of his cowardice.

The old gypsy was even fond of sweet, gentle, loyal little Babette; and yet, because she feared the time might come when Babette would point to her and say, "She is the old woman that carried me away and brought me back," she wished for her death.

If the gypsy slept during this night—this horrible, lonely, dark night!—one would not like to answer for her dreams; and yet, thinking of all the trials of her poor misguided life, one cannot help feeling sorry for her, and hoping that, for this night at least, she was enabled to forget, or to dream of the early days of her own life before she turned her feet into crooked paths.

At dawn next morning she arose from her hiding-place. The habit of early rising was one of a lifetime, and there was something in daylight that seemed to open her eyes. She was stiff and sore. Her shoulders and arms ached, and she coughed. She had slept from sheer exhaustion; but now, awake again, the events of last night were clear enough. Her first thought was that Noute would be looking for her. She must get back to the boat. Of course she had no suspicion of Noute's having followed her.

Forcing herself out of her cramped position, she stepped out of her nook and began rubbing her arms and stamping her feet, trying to overcome the stiffness of her limbs. Then, taking off her shawl, she proceeded to shake it, when a noise quite near startled her. She looked up. Standing not more

than twenty-five or thirty feet away from her, rubbing his eyes and waking up, was Noute! He had spent the night at the other end of the show-case. The recognition was mutual, and yet, after they had dropped—as if shot—back into their own corners, both began to hope they had not been recognized. Indeed, the old woman was so filled with consternation at this unexpected sight of Noute, that she began presently to doubt her own eyes, and to think she had seen a vision.

There was indeed something uncanny in the sudden appearance of his grotesque figure, dimly seen in the half-light of a foggy New Orleans morning. They both sat still for some time fearing to move, and then they seemed anxious to reassure themselves, and presently began peeping cautiously around the show-case. And a very funny game of bopeep it was—between a haggard, superstitious old woman, looking for a ghost, and poor, weak-minded, blinking Noute, now anxious only to get away.

Growing restless, he happened to glance upward. Just above his head was an opening—the deep window from which the show-case had been removed. It took less time

for him to spring into this, and to rush through the old building, making his escape through a door opening on another street, than is required in the telling.

Once safely out of sight, he took to his heels and ran until he saw the low bank of the bayou, when he proceeded leisurely to the boat. The gypsy continued the bopeep game at her end of the show-case for some time alone, venturing farther forward from time to time, until she suddenly realized that there was no one there. Then, more frightened than ever, she pulled herself up, and, limping across, made a careful examination.

Not the slightest sign was there of any one's presence. She didn't even notice the dark opening above, or think of the possibility of Noute's escape. Shaking her head sadly and wondering, she hobbled away ; and when, an hour later, she reached the boat and saw Noute lying apparently asleep, she felt that something awful was going to happen. Here was Noute, just where she had left him. She had surely seen a ghost. As she stepped into the boat Noute poked his head from under the sail, rubbed his eyes, and yawned, with a finished hypocrisy that would have done credit to a brighter mind.

When the colored woman, Clarisse, had waited for some moments in the hall 'at the Bondurantes', and the gypsy did not come back, she stepped out on the porch to look for her. Finding that she had gone, the old negress was much startled, and when she went in she locked the door.

Reluctant to believe the truth, the old doctor came himself, bringing a candle, and searched the porch and the yard below, fearing she might have fallen. And when he went in he, too, locked the door and felt uncomfortable.

The mystery surrounding her lent a new interest to the sick child, and during all that night, and for days and weeks afterwards, while her life hung on a slender thread, she was kindly nursed and tended.

Notwithstanding its polished floors, its frescoed ceilings, and tapestried chambers, the handsome Bondurante home had for years been a house of mourning, and the solemn stillness that reigned throughout its parlors, halls, and galleries bore silent witness to the sorrow that had entered it nearly twenty years before.

Then, in the autumn of 1853—that year of the terrible epidemic that carried sorrow into

so many homes — two little coffins had been borne the same day out of the great iron gate by men in stockinged feet, so that the parents, who lay ill with the yellow scourge, should not know.

Although this was more than nineteen years ago, the broken-hearted mother had never left the house since ; while the father, already rich from successful practice, had retired from the world, and devoted himself to the pursuit of science.

Besides those whom we have seen — the doctor, his wife, and Clarisse—but one other person lived on the Bondurante place. This was “Uncle Tom,” Clarisse’s husband, a superannuated old negro who never left the yard.

The closed house needed little tending, and neither the doctor nor madame would have their quiet lives disturbed by strange servants. Clarisse they had had always, and her services were sufficient for them. They had no company, excepting occasionally the priest, and their wants were few. The doctor himself supplied their small table from the French market. Uncle Tom answered the call of milkman or baker, swept the magnolia-leaves from the garden-walks, and filled

up the moments between in rubbing his old rheumatic legs and smoking his pipe.

And so, in one of the busiest quarters of a crowded city, these four old people had lived peacefully in undisturbed seclusion for all these years. The neighbors understood, and from the low-browed cottages that faced the square on all sides they looked with a reverential sympathy upon its high brick walls, as if they bounded a monastery or church; and the pitiful story of the handsome son and beautiful daughter who had died the same day, while the parents were too ill to know, was told many times on summer evenings by the mothers who sat in their white sacques on their low door-steps, surrounded by children who never tired of the touching recital.

The stately old brick house, sitting dark and still, and growing dingy and time-stained in the centre of the old-fashioned garden, now a dense wilderness of riotous growth, dominated the neighborhood like an embodied sorrow, and the mothers looking upon it often drew their babes closer to their bosoms, and sent up to Heaven a little prayer for the lonely mother in the big, sad house.

The open bars of the heavy front gate gave

the curious their only chance of a peep within, disclosing a cold, broad front from which the gray plaster had fallen in patches, but over which a friendly vine of English ivy had thrown a rich cloak of green.

On the parlor side of the great central hall the vine had left no hint of the windows beneath, and had even ascended the roof, and, possessing itself of the chimney, made firm connection with the branch of an overhanging tree, where it mingled its rich, glossy foliage with festoons of gray moss, and was lost in a dense mass of color. Here the three growths all seemed struggling for supremacy, with about equal promises of success.

From the two broad windows in the left side of the house a dim light shone through the heavy shade every night. This was the doctor's library and study. It had been his office in the old days of his practice—was "office" still to any of the poor in the neighborhood who asked his services. As it was well known that the doctor never sent any bills, however, he had little free practice. To go to him was a confession of poverty—an advertisement of it. Better go to some one who charged, even if one could never pay. Still, there were times when the good doctor

was called in, in extreme cases, because of his reputed skill, after others had failed. He had been out on such a visit on the night of the storm. He had felt no special interest in the little home patient at first, beyond his anxiety to make her well and the natural feeling of sympathy one feels for a deserted child. There was something tragic in the incident. Her people, he surmised, were probably poor, starving wretches who, seeing that death seemed imminent, had deserted their child in her extremity to die and be buried by strangers. Of course, the doctor never doubted that the old woman had voluntarily sought his gate.

For more than a month it seemed that Babette would die—and yet she lived. Finally, the great dark eyes that had gazed vacantly about the room turned appealingly to the faces about her bed; and when the gentle old mother, Madame Bondurante, bent over her to straighten her pillow, two thin little hands were clasped about her neck, and the parched lips kissed the old cheek that no child had kissed for twenty years. And then—oh, how strange it was that the old name should come back to her!—the little lips said, “Tante Angèle.”

She was too young at the time she was stolen to remember the old nurse "Tante Angèle," or even to recall her name in connection with any memory; but now, after the long season of fever and unconsciousness, it seemed as if early impressions were floating at random through her mind. The first coherent words she had spoken for weeks were "Tante Angèle," then she said "Nénaine"—her own name for her grandmother whose god-child she was.

But the strangest part—the sweetest part as it turned out—is yet to come. Angèle was Madame Bondurante's own name, and to hear it in tones of affection from the lips of the little sick child, who had so long been her constant care, touched her heart strangely. While the child's trembling arms were about her neck she had called her name—"Tante Angèle"—and so fixed her own place in her heart.

The old mother buried her face in the pillow and wept. The little waif whom she had nursed back to life through charity—only because it had come into her way to do it—she had learned to love.

When the doctor came in an hour afterwards he found her still weeping. Seating



"TANTE ANGELE"

himself beside the bed, he took the little wasted hand in his, and his own eyes were filled with tears. The presence of the child in the house, day in and day out, the awakening love in both their hearts for her, had revived old memories.

“Oh, my children, my children!” cried the old mother, burying her face in the pillow beside the little stranger child; while Babette, not understanding and indeed bewildered for the moment at her distress, looked in questioning wonder from one to the other. She had a vague, misty impression that she had been away off somewhere and had gotten back. There was something indefinable in the refined atmosphere of the home into which she had fallen that seemed strangely familiar. She was still very weak, and during the first few days of her returning consciousness she would fall suddenly asleep, and on waking would start, as if not quite sure of where she was. Sometimes she would keep her eyes closed while she passed her little fingers over the silken spread and felt the linen pillow-case, as if to reassure herself before she dared look about her. Perhaps she was afraid lest she should wake suddenly some time to see the sky through

the cracks in Nick's roof, as she had done many a time during her life on the beach. Even the language about her puzzled her ears. Although she could not understand it, it was not wholly strange. For more than three years she had heard only—what shall we call it? A unique *patois* certainly was this dago-English, with the intonation of the gypsy. And so the convalescent's recovery was somewhat retarded.

Soon, however, there came a substitution of impressions. The things about her were real. The language had a meaning, and the memories of the beach, with its jargon, moved slowly back into mistiness and shadow. That was the dream now, and yet it was one that came to her many times, even while she lay with eyes open.

CHAPTER VIII

A SECOND month passed. Babette was getting well. Her beautiful long hair had long ago been sacrificed to the fever, and now her little round head was covered with short crisp rings of brown. As she sat, day by day, in the middle of madame's high soft bed—the greatest token of love, this, that madame could have shown her, surrounded by books, toys, flowers, everything that eager affection could suggest—one could see at a glance that she was the ruling member of a devoted household.

Clarisse, the old colored woman, seemed quite as fond as the rest, and even Uncle Tom would hobble in and lay a great open magnolia blossom or a crêpe-myrtle bloom upon the bed for "*tite mamzelle*."

Madame Bondurante was very busy these days. There were little clothes to be made for the convalescent, and she and Clarisse were to make them. The sweet secret of the mysterious coming of the child into their home

and hearts was too precious to be intrusted to any one else—yet. Madame never went out. She would not go now ; but did not Clarisse know what to buy for a little girl's wardrobe? She could go up to Canal Street to "Syme's" or "Levois & Jamison's," where she would be sure to find the best French prints for everyday wear, the finest merinos and plaids for "Sunday" dresses.

These two old women, mistress and servant though they were—formerly owner and slave—were bound to each other by many ties and by years of uninterrupted peaceful intercourse ; and while they sat and sewed together, clothing the new Joy in the household in garments fashioned after those worn by the other who had passed out of it twenty years ago, they were as happy in their novel task and as unconscious of present styles as the child herself.

It is true Babette did pout just a little, and declare that the broad lace-bordered pantalets, that came nearly to her little ankle-ties, were "too long," and that the skirt, which stopped at the knees, was "too short ;" but when she glanced at the portrait above the mantel—the grandest picture of a little girl she had ever seen in her life—and saw

that her pantalets hung down in exactly the same way, she was quite satisfied.

The girl in the portrait, sitting day and night so still in her deep gilt frame, holding a red rose-bud in one hand, while with the other she clasped the neck of a great shaggy dog, made a deep impression upon Babette. It was an imposing picture.

Some day, when she should be able to make friends with the old dog who followed Uncle Tom around the yard, she would pick a red rose-bud and try to make a picture of herself like it. She had tried the pose as far as she could, holding up an imaginary rose-bud, before the glass under the pier-table, and it was really very good fun.

It is true the old dog in the yard was not quite like the one in the picture, and the little girl was very different from herself, having two long braids of straight black hair hanging over her shoulders instead of a mass of short curls, but the marks of elegance were present in both. There were the low-necked dress, the short puffed sleeves, the long pantalets. The rosebud and dog would make it quite complete. Just how elegant her new garments were she, of course, had not the slightest idea.

Madame had been educated in a convent, and knew all the fine stitches of exquisite needle-work that were taught in those early days—that are taught just as thoroughly yet to any one who cares to learn. There were cambric ruffles with drawn threads—hem-stitched and trimmed with real Valenciennes lace, rolled and whipped so closely that one could hardly find the stitches on the quaint garments that delighted only approving eyes within the closely walled square. They were never seen without—would not be for many a long day, if ever.

Madame had taught Babette to call her Tante Angèle. The child herself had said the words. Before any one knew that the question would ever arise, she had unconsciously named the relationship, fixed her place. She was not to occupy the position of only a little waif dropped in from the street, neither had she intruded within the holy of holies. She had not said “madame” or “lady” after the dago fashion, neither had she called her “mother.”

It is true, she had only once called the name “Tante Angèle,” and had then seemed to forget it, having even to be taught it as something quite new afterwards.

This madame regarded with a superstitious feeling, and, not understanding how it had come to be lying with other half-forgotten names in the child's mind, to return as will a bit of an old song sometimes to older persons—to come and drop out as mysteriously—she said that the angels had told her name to the sick child. And she believed it, too.

It is, perhaps, painful at first, this seeming transfer of the name of the old servant Angèle to another, but it was only a coincidence. Perhaps, as time wore on, it may have awakened associations or suggested questions to the child's mind. She was given to thoughtful moods sometimes, and more than once, as she lay stretched at full length upon the rug before the fire, after one of her long silences, she said aloud, scarce above her breath, "Tante Angèle — Tante Angèle," as if the name had some mysterious meaning to her. But, perhaps, some other time she called other names, and no one happened to hear.

Madame heard this, however, and wondered just what it meant. Was she talking to the angels again?

There were many family portraits in the old house ; among them one of a sweet-

faced woman, at which Babette was very fond of looking. "Who is that lady, Tante Angèle?" she asked of madame one day.

"That is my sister, who is in heaven—my sister Marie—" Madame spoke with some reluctance. She feared questions from the child, hardly knowing why.

"And is she another one of my aunts?"

The answer came slowly again: "Yes, chérie."

"Was she my aunt Marie?"

"Yes, dear."

"And was she little Marie's aunt Marie?"

"Yes, love."

"And did she call her 'Tante Marie'?"

"No, chérie. She called her 'Tantine.'"

"What is Tantine, Tante Angèle? Is it aunt?"

"It means 'little aunt,' chérie."

Babette was thoughtful for a few minutes, and asked no questions; but presently she rose and went to madame, and climbed upon her lap. Then, putting her arm around her neck, she said: "Tante Angèle, you are little. I want to call you Tantine. May I?"

"And don't you like to call me by my name—Tante Angèle?"



BABETTE AND "LITTLE MARIE"

"Yes, I like it—for you, when I say it, Tante Angèle; but when I am not speaking to you, I don't like it for you. It is one of my dream names."

"A dream name, my precious? And what is a dream name?"

"Oh, I don't know; but I have a great many. There is 'Nénaine,' and 'Tante Angèle,' and—"

"Never mind, my angel, dream names are foolish. Forget them. Call me Tantine; I like it better, anyway."

And she held Babette tight in her arms while she was speaking, as if she were afraid she might fly away.

But a greater trial than this, even, came one day, and madame was not in the least prepared for it. Babette, since the night the gypsy had stolen her from her own people, had never heard her own name. The gypsy had heard her spoken of among the Le Charmant servants as "*Bébé*," her pet name in the family, and though she well knew her own name, she naturally avoided using it. So she called her "Baby." If Babette had been asked her own name, at any time up to the night she had left the Sicilian household, she would have answered, in all honesty, "Baby,"

or perhaps "Sissy," Nicholas, as the children often called her.

But no one ever asked it. She had never thought it out, perhaps, and now she would never make this combination. But—well, she was beginning to ask herself questions.

It was natural that madame and Clarisse should have called her "*Bébé*" at first, for want of another name. Even had they known her real name they would as often have called the sick child by the tender diminutive; but when she accepted the name so readily, the easiest thing to do was to let the subject drift along.

The truth was, madame did as little thinking as possible on the subject of Babette. She was afraid to think. She only knew that she was there. She was very dear. A question in any direction meant distress and perplexity of mind.

And so when, one day, Babette asked suddenly, "Tantine, is *Bébé* my real name—was I christened *Bébé*?"—she was obliged to answer, "No, my dear."

"Well, then, Tantine, what is my real name?"

Madame's face did not betray the panic that reigned within her heart as she answered,

asking for forgiveness even while she spoke, "Your name is Marie." And to herself she said, "I name her now Marie."

"And am I named for my tante Marie, or for my cousin Marie?"

"For both, my love."

This much was true. In the brief moment when she had decided the name, it was given in memory of her best loved — child and sister.

But the catechism lesson was not over yet.

"And was I christened long ago, Tantine?" she asked, presently.

"Long ago — when you were small — yes, chérie. And now it is time for *Bébé* to come and take her nap. She is not very strong yet."

Madame was safe in saying she had been christened — and long ago. It must have been so, else how was Nénaine (god-mother) a dream name?

But she could not risk another question. Babette was not sleepy. She said so, and her bright eyes confirmed it. Then she must be hungry? No? Then they would take a walk in the garden and find some violets, or go out into the poultry-yard and see the little chickens. And so the subject was changed.

The Bondurantes' was a changed home. Long-closed doors stood open; sunshine and cheer had come in with the child. There were broken toys lying around in a disorder that told only of indulgence and devotion, and the old walls often echoed with merry laughter. The old couple were becoming bound up in the child to a degree that was indeed pathetic.

And they had not thoughtlessly nor quickly taken her into their hearts. For weeks, although convinced by the evidence that she had been deserted by her own people, they had scanned the daily papers for notices of a lost child, and at every clank of the heavy knocker on the iron gate they first hoped and then feared that the old woman had returned to claim her.

Now, when they loved her even as their own, there were times when they shuddered at the bare possibility of having, at some time, to give her up. During much of the nearly two months of her illness Babette's mind had been a blank, and as bits of her old life came back to her—names, faces, incidents—they seemed to belong to a far-away period, and what they all meant she did not understand.

One day, some months after her recovery, something happened that filled her with delight, and frightened every other member of the household. Ever since he had seen her taken into the doctor's door on the night of the storm, Noute had come, whenever opportunity offered, and peered through the iron gate, hoping for a glimpse of the child.

The old gypsy had been hopelessly crippled with rheumatism ever since that dreadful night, and, after hobbling into town once or twice, she had come to terms with the French market tradesmen; and so now she always waited in the boat, while Noute left the basket of fish in the market and returned with the money. This gave him greater freedom than he had known before, and he never failed, both going and coming, though it was far out of his way, to pass by the gate and look for Babette. Even on the first occasion, when the gypsy had hobbled out herself, Noute had locked the boat to the shore and deserted it as soon as her back was turned, hurrying to the Bondurante gate, and getting back to the boat before her return.

When several months had passed, and he had never seen her, he almost despaired ; but

still, faithful in his devotion, he continued to come. On this particular day he had waited as usual, and was just turning away when the little girl skipped across the yard, her hands full of roses. She recognized him instantly, and, running to the gate, handed him the flowers.

Noute was wild with joy. After dancing and laughing and even crying a little in his old way for a moment, he hurriedly threw the roses back at her feet, and, with a series of quick gestures, ran away. What did he want with flowers? All he had ever gathered were for her.

Babette did not stop to pick them up, but, running into the house in great glee, told her "tantine," while she climbed into her lap, that "Noute had come! and he had told her by his motions that he was coming again!"

The sight of the mute seemed to revive a train of memories, for she began to tell her "aunt" and "uncle" all about "poor Noute who could not hear nor speak," of how "bad, drunken Nick had scolded and beaten him," and of many things of which she had never before spoken.

Is it any wonder the old lady looked at her husband sorrowfully, and shook her

head as she listened? If *some one* knew where she was, and was coming back, surely there would be trouble. They would have to give up the child.

Old madame was very pale, and her hand trembled as, stroking the little girl's curls, she told her never to go into the front yard again without her aunt or uncle. She held the child tightly in her arms a long time that night, and no one knew in the twilight that the old mother's face was wet with tears.

On the next day the old doctor, his own heart unsteady with fear, said to his wife: "We cannot hide this dear child. She came to us unasked. It was the Lord's doing. She has blessed our home. Let us pray that she may not be taken away; but if she must go, all the bolts and bars in Louisiana will not keep her."

The doctor's words were wise, and yet, although his old wife, heeding them, let Babette play at will anywhere within the gate, she kept her eyes upon her whenever she entered the front yard. And the gate was kept locked.

A week after this—a week to a day from the time Noute had come—Babette sat upon the arm of madame's chair on the front gal-

lery. The old lady was nodding, while the little girl amused herself pinning long strings of four-o'clocks to her hair. Every now and then the head would bob so suddenly that a flower-curl would fall, and Babette would laugh aloud while she replaced it, when the old lady's eyes would half open, and then, smiling, she would go back to sleep.

While they sat thus in the late afternoon the doctor came in hurriedly, leaving the iron gate ajar. Into this open gate, before any one had noticed him, without leave or license, walked Noute. Even Babette did not see him until he was half-way up the front steps.

Going straight up to her, he laid a little bundle at her feet, stepped back to the foot of the stairs, dropped the larger parcel which he carried upon the bottom step, *and sat down*. This bundle contained an old blanket, several articles of shabby clothing, and some scraps of tobacco—all the earthly possessions of Noute the foolish. *He had come to stay.*

CHAPTER IX

Is it any wonder that the old lady screamed when, waking suddenly, she saw poor Noute sitting at the foot of the steps, a half-dozen feet away, blinking and grinning? Is it any wonder that, seeing him, she seized Babette and held her tightly in her arms? Noute was not beautiful or prepossessing.

The doctor, hearing madame scream, ran out in alarm, fearing that something terrible had happened, and when he saw what had taken place he was startled and sorely puzzled.

Intelligent communication with this uncanny-looking half-idiot seemed impossible. After thinking over the matter for a few moments, during which time Noute's blinking eyes moved eagerly from one face to another of the three above him, the doctor decided that he must go.

Going to him, he took his bundle from the step and pointed to the gate. Seeing that this had no effect, he moved towards the

gate with the parcel ; but at this Noute only fixed his eyes upon Babette with an expression of helpless appeal that was pitiful.

Evidently, if he were to go, his orders must come from the youngest person present. Noticing this, the doctor took Babette by the hand and bade her make him understand that he must go ; but, instead of obeying, she threw herself in the old doctor's arms and began to cry, begging that Noute might stay. For a second time she was his champion.

Seeing her distress, the doctor sat down and drew her upon his lap, while he tried to reason with her. But with her arms half the time around his neck she told, between sobs, the pitiful story of Noute's life—as it came back to her, seeing him sitting there before her : of how Nick kicked and beat him ; how, rain or shine, cold or warm, he slept in the old boat ; how he worked and fished and made her pretty things, and never hurt anybody. He couldn't help being ugly, and blinking : God made him that way.

How could they resist her ? After a short whispered consultation they decided that perhaps it was best to let events take their own course in all things concerning the

child. Excepting for their fears, this would have been the easiest thing to do, anyway. They were naturally kind to the poor and unfortunate. It was always easier to say *yes* than *no*.

And so Noute stayed. Uncle Tom was called and instructed to give him—at least, for the present—a room in an outer building in the yard.

The old negro scratched his head, and looked very doubtful and suspicious when he saw the remarkable individual whom he was to instate as his own near neighbor; but, hobbling off, he soon returned with a big iron key, signifying his readiness to obey.

When he finally started across the yard Babette motioned to Noute to follow; and, eager to see him installed, she skipped along at his side, while the doctor and his wife, with a nervous fear that the weird creature might seize the child and mysteriously disappear, followed slowly behind.

Clarisse, hearing the commotion, had also come out to see, and now brought up the rear, wiping first one and then the other of her clean hands upon her apron as she walked—a way she had of expressing her

disapproval of things in general when words would have been out of place. It was a queer little procession.

When Uncle Tom opened the door and put Noute's bundle in the room and pointed to the bed, the poor creature seemed, for a few moments, to lose all control of himself in excess of joy.

He skipped up and down the yard, threw up his hat and caught it, turned several somersaults, and finally, grinning and fanning himself with his hat, took his seat, for the first time in his poor life, *on his own doorstep*.

Whether begged or borrowed, it was his room, his bed, *his home*—a home at the foot of the throne, upon which sat his little divinity, Babette. And so they left him—still grinning, blinking, and fanning—as happy as a lord.

When they returned to the house the doctor went into his study, and for several hours he could be heard slowly walking up and down the length of the room. His hands were clasped behind his back, and he was lost in thought.

Babette, remembering the little bundle Noute had brought her, ran back to the front porch, madame following. And these

are the things the bundle contained: a little embroidered muslin dress, time-worn and yellow; a pair of blue kid slippers and silk stockings, wrapped in a blue cashmere cloak; and a long blue silken cord with heavy tassels. Tied in a separate parcel within the blue cloak was a red cotton kerchief filled with trinkets—a lot of pebbles and pretty shells, a tiny wooden boat, and various pieces of doll furniture.

These things Babette recognized as her playthings of the beach. Noute had made them for her. But of the clothing she knew only a very little.

She had seen the bundle tucked into a niche above the rafters in Nick's house, and "granny" had told her that they were her "christening clothes," and some day she would wear them, when they would go to the city in a boat.

When they came to the city she was sick, and granny was in a hurry. Maybe she forgot to bring them? This was all she knew. Did Tantine know any more? Did her own mother make the christening dress, or did Tantine make it? Why did they send her to live with granny?

These were questions hard to answer, but

madame knew not whether they were hard or easy. She scarcely heard them. She seemed to be in a dream. It was all so strange. Here were new items—even a new name—"granny." She was, no doubt, the old woman who had deserted the sick child—was her "grandmother," just as they had suspected.

Every word had fallen like lead upon the old lady's heart, and as she turned the dainty garments over and over on her lap with trembling fingers tears blinded her eyes.

"Why do you cry, Tantine? Do my christening clothes make you think of my mother, or of your little girl Marie? Don't cry, Tantine. Let us put them away." So, smothering her old face with kisses, Babette comforted madame in the best way she knew.

The bundle of clothing told a new story. Unless the child had been the *protégée* of some rich woman who had given her these garments, she was herself of refined people, as every feature and instinct had already declared. Rich people do not often give such garments as these to the poor. It was a great mystery.

The old couple sat up very late that night,

talking over Noute's coming; but the wife did not tell her husband about the mysterious clothing. She was afraid.

During the first few days after Noute's arrival Babette prattled often of the past, but her words gave no clew to her history. There were "pebbles," "shells," "a boat." There must have been a sea-shore—but where?

Noute the foolish, the dumb, coming as a representative of her people, instead of answering any of their questions, seemed like a grotesque interrogation-point, punctuating every mental query with a final doubt. And yet, try as hard as they might, they could not be quite sorry he was mute. It was as if a suddenly discovered door, through which Babette might escape, had been found safely locked and barred.

The child occasionally spoke of strange children, but their Italian names, while they confirmed first suspicions, really told as little as those she had called before—granny, Nick, or Noute.

Noute had appeared in the flesh, it is true, but he could not even speak for himself, much less could he unfold Babette's strange story—or even such bits of it as he knew.

There was no name on the clothing. Of course, madame never thought of anything so absurd as looking inside the blue tassels.

Noute proved all Babette had promised for him—he was industrious, obedient, and obliging. When Uncle Tom handed him a broom—and the old man presented it at arm's-length—he nearly swept the ground away. There were no more leaves for the old rheumatic to pick up. After being shown once how to do any simple mechanical work, Noute needed no further teaching—no reminding.

Seeing how capable he was, Uncle Tom began to recover some of his old ambitions regarding the old garden. The box-hedge bordering many of its curiously shaped flower-beds had grown disorderly and irregular. He easily showed Noute, by clipping it for a short distance himself, how to restore it to its old primness of outline, and soon every border within the square presented a surface as level as a table.

The cocoa-grass, that had for years held undisputed sway in the interstices between the bricks of the winding walks, defining the design in which they were laid in a bright

green bobbinet figure stretched diagonally, was the next object of Noute's attention; and then the bricks themselves came in for a peeling process. Whether coated in moss or lichen or velvet mould, it was all one to the keen edge of Noute's trowel. But full joy came with the laying on of the red wash. Not a brick within the four streets dared show a bearded face but with one swoop of his razor-edged tool it was clean shaven, while a sweeping touch of the brush restored its blooming color.

It was not long before Noute was generally acknowledged to be a most valuable acquisition. Capable in many ways, he was ever willing. There was only one thing that he would not do. *He would not leave the yard.* When directed on one occasion to go out on a simple errand, he sat flat upon the ground and refused to move.

Perhaps he dimly realized that the iron gate was the visible boundary between his present life of comparative luxury and the former one of privation and abuse. And then Babette was within these walls—Babette who had fought for him on the beach, who had pleaded for him with tears at the big gate, the sweet child Babette—all he

loved in the whole wide world. Maybe if he should ever go out, the gate would be locked.

Whenever there was no special duty in sight *and he was tired cutting cocoa-grass*—for no one who undertakes to keep down the aspiring heads of a cocoa-crop can ever say he has nothing to do—he rested himself by such change of occupation as he found in making pretty things for Babette.

There were soon little rustic seats under many of the trees for her, swings wherever a projecting limb offered a suggestion, while the great spreading oak, that cast its shade over a broad space within one corner of the square, held up in its bosom a perfect *bijou* of doll-houses. A narrow stair, rudely made but strong, wound around its trunk, leading to a room above, in which, besides many expensive toys, were various articles of doll-furniture of Noute's making. Within the one small door of this playhouse, surrounded by her numerous doll-family, Babette would sit in her little rocker, singing some preferred baby to sleep.

The doctor's hammock hung from the oak at the foot of the winding stair, and often in the summer afternoons, while languidly swinging, he would close his book or lay



"ROUTE MADE DOLL-HOUSES FOR BABETTE"



aside his paper, and enter into a game of "playing ladies" with the little house-keeper above his head. Conversations would generally begin in about this fashion. Of course they were always in French, though occasionally Babette's answers were interspersed with English words of very mixed accent.

"Isn't it getting too cold for you, Mrs. Highflyer, so far north?" the doctor would begin.

"Not at all, doctor; but it makes my children very sick."

"That is too bad; you'd better bring them south and let me treat them."

"Well, I think I will bring a few who have the worst sicknesses." And down the little doll-mother would trudge, her arms full of sick babies.

If the little *maman* wanted medicine given in abundance, she was not disappointed. The doctor would send her over to "Dr. Indian Shot's drug-store" for pills for the rag-baby who had measles, and away she would go, and bend down the tall, dry seed-pods of the canna stalks for the pills which "Dr. Indian Shot" always kept in stock.

Of course the rag-baby would be bad, and have to be spanked before she would swal-

low them. Dolls usually have to be spanked before they will take any medicine, and especially rag-dolls, who have no noses to be held.

The wax-doll was often pronounced in a "dangerous condition," rolling her eyes as if she were "going into fits." She must have mustard-plasters — tiger-lily petals — tied on wrists and ankles.

Another, who was "bilious," needed a capsule of rhubarb — a whole acorn ; while yet another, deathly pale with the paint all washed off her face, needed nourishing. Fresh milk from the fig-leaves—exactly an acorn-cupful every fifteen minutes—would bring back the color to her cheeks. The black baby who bled sawdust had to be bandaged, and, indeed, there was, according to all accounts, not a healthy doll in the lot.

Happy days were these for Babette ; happy days for the old doctor ; happy, happy days for all who loved the sweet child.

The doctor, indeed, loved her as if she had always been his own ; and when his wife taught her that she was, in truth, their veritable niece, and that they had sent her to the sea-shore for a time so that she might

grow strong, he had not the heart to interfere. So Babette, or *Bébée*, as she was always called, lived on, happy in the unquestioning belief that she was a real niece of her dearly beloved "aunt" and "uncle."

It is a pity when devotion is so short-sighted as to place those we love best in a false position; and yet these awful mistakes are made every day in this mistake-making world, with so much suffering and pain as a result.

Of course it became known in the neighborhood after a time that a child had come into the great, still house; and when some one said it was a niece, another answered: "Oh no, not a niece—a great-niece, maybe. Dey have many *rillation*, but for twenty years dey have not seen one. For a whole year—yes, two year—carriages come an' stop at de door; but madame, she see nobody. So dey come no more. Now, *maybe* one of doze niece or cousin is die an' leave a child, and dey take it, or maybe one orphan asylum give it; but I b'lieve not. Doze Bondurante don't wait twenty year to pick a orphan when dey want one. No; dat chile, she is got good blood. You can see dat on 'er face. She is Bondurante—on'y not a

niece—maybe a great-niece; but it's all de same. An' it's a good t'ing—yas."

A number of nodding heads showed approval of the speaker's sentiments.

It was a good thing that the doors of the great house were opened and sunshine had flowed in—so all agreed.

And so curiosity was satisfied. No one beyond the walls knew any of the real circumstances of Babette's coming, excepting the old gypsy. And she would never tell.

As a matter of fact, the Bondurantes' only near of kin were a sister of the doctor and her family living in France.

If any of their distant connections, of whom there were many, heard of their adopting a child, they would take little interest in the fact. They had been denied admittance as comforters. They would not go to congratulate.

The true story, so far as the family themselves knew it, was pretty safe.

When madame said, "She is our niece," Clarisse would have sworn to it.

It may seem strange that they did not associate this child with the little one stolen several years before; but yet there was every reason why they should not have

done so. Had not they, with their own eyes, seen her deserted by her own grandmother?

The only possible suggestion of the little Le Charmant child was the description of the clothing, which madame had put out of sight and mind as quickly as possible, not because of any definite suspicion, but for their definite hint that there might be a mystery back of her desertion.

The loss of the Le Charmant child had made no more impression upon her sad heart than any of the ordinary heart-rending stories of the daily papers in its children's death-list.

And now, having taken a strange child into her affections, she naturally put from her all disturbing thoughts, and came back to the unquestioning joy of loving, which was as wine to her starved heart.

How little or how much Noute knew, no one could surmise. Poor Noute was a strange mixture. Some things he knew in a detached way, while simple facts, seeming quite a part of these things, found no lodging in his mind. Perhaps he had never gotten so far along in thinking as to need the word *because*. If he saw light and shadow,

they were to him only dark and light, not one existing *because* of the other. And yet he evidently knew some things that surprise us. He knew that the child brought to the boat on Mardi-Gras night had worn clothing that was laid aside. He knew where it was kept, and had stolen it and brought it back. Exactly how much more he knew, maybe some day he might tell.

CHAPTER X

"CAN horses hear, Tantine?" Babette had climbed upon the arm of the doctor's chair, and sat with her arm around his neck as, turning towards madame, she asked the simple question.

"Can horses hear?" the doctor repeated. "Why, my dear, certainly. Haven't they ears? God made ears to hear."

"Noute has ears, and he can't hear. For what did God make Noute's ears?"

"Yes, Noute's ears were made to hear, and Uncle's Tom's legs were made to walk. Uncle Tom's legs are sick now and he can't walk. Noute's ears are sick."

"Why don't you cure them, then? You are a doctor. You cured me when I was sick. You are curing Uncle Tom's legs, and he walks with crutches."

She slipped off the arm of the chair to his lap as she continued, now in a pleading tone:

"*Please* try to cure poor Noute's ears. Just think, he doesn't even know his own name,

and when he goes to heaven where he can hear—Tantine says he will hear in heaven—he won't know when the angels call him. Even if God made an angel write it for him, he couldn't read it. I can read it in print letters like Tantine teaches me, and I am only seven. And Clarisse says Noute is old. Many times at night, when I say my prayers, I think about poor old Noute."

Before she had gotten from his lap the good old doctor had promised, while he kissed her, to try to open the ears of Noute "the foolish."

Babette was nearly eight years old now. It was time she should begin to study regularly from books. It had been time for a year the old people thought, but they had kept putting it off, and madame had even tried to teach her herself. This had been but a poor success, however, as Babette had found as many "whys" to ask about the letter A, for instance, as there were characters in the entire alphabet, and half of them madame could not answer. The simple act of laying a book upon her knee between the child she so dearly loved and herself seemed to be a declaration of war.

It was hard to realize that the same patient, loving hands that wrought the beautiful and patient stitches in Babette's numerous embroidered dresses were raised to Heaven in utter despair a dozen times in a fifteen-minutes' reading or writing lesson; but so it was—not that the little pupil was stupid or wayward; far from it; she seemed rather to be too full of ideas. All around the lesson they would flutter like a swarm of gay butterflies, settling everywhere, anywhere, excepting on the desired figure or word. It was maddening. Such effort is always maddening to all save those favored ones who have a gift at this sort of butterfly catching. Such are the real teachers. The others try to drive them away—and go mad.

And yet, although the question of Babette's schooling was so serious a one from every point of view, madame it was who continually put it off. It would mean either the coming in of a governess or the child's going out to school. She grew jealous at the bare thought of either. It would take her *chère Bébé* out of her arms—figuratively at least. But it could not forever be averted—and Babette was growing so tall.

Just at the time when madame and the

doctor were consulting together, casting about for a suitable school or teacher, hoping to find either to-morrow or next day—never to-day—a letter came to the doctor that decided the matter for the present, at least. It would be an experiment, but there was much to recommend it.

The doctor's letter was from a college friend of his youth, now a sugar-planter of the Lafourche country. He had a son whom he wished to send to New Orleans to complete his medical education. Would the doctor interest himself in finding a pleasant and safe home for him?

"He is a fine, honest country lad," the father wrote, "and I hope to give him the educational advantages of your great city without exposing him to its dangers. He is a good English and Latin scholar, and would be glad of an opportunity to defray the cost of the medical course he has begun by tutoring, and I should encourage the manly effort even did my circumstances not demand it; but you know the war has left us all poor. My first choice would be to have him with you, but I do not ask so much. Do with him as you think best."

What an opportunity for mutual advan-

tage ! Madame declared that the letter was a direct answer to her prayers.

Here was a youth—a gentleman's son, of whom his father could say "he is a fine, honest lad," educated, ambitious, *anxious to teach*—a stranger who would not have heard any possible gossip, and who would not be full of curiosity. He would believe what he was told, and that would be an end of it. So much for their share of the benefit.

For the young man there would be the famous Dr. Bondurante to superintend and direct his studies, the free use of an exceptional library, a refined and elegant home.

At least, they would try it. And this is how John McDonald came into the household of Dr. Bondurante.

He was a tall, somewhat awkward, but dignified youth of nineteen years. His crisp, curling auburn hair and dark, direct eyes hinted of the Scotch ancestry already suggested by his name. Shy at first, reticent, yet quick and intelligent—a gentleman, carrying in his steady eyes that which bespeaks a fixed and high purpose—is it any wonder that he was immediately liked and respected, and soon loved by all the household ?

He felt a little timid in beginning his du-

ties as teacher to the petted French-talking child, but he soon won her affectionate respect by invariable gentleness, patience, and firmness, and forthwith became a hero in her eyes—a hero with only grand and stately qualities. And yet when lessons were over he would often join in her amusements, until it seemed almost as if she had found a play-fellow. Still, there was a difference, for while he would sit with her under the oak and whittle a branch, cut from above his head, into some fantastic shape for her amusement, he would, perhaps, be explaining its beautiful markings, the delicate birthday rings that were traced in clear lines from core to bark, or how the dark knot running through it had come from the early growth of a twig, to which the rings had adapted themselves. Or, taking a microscope from his pocket, he would introduce her to the strange, amusing families of tiny creatures who had set up house-keeping and started villages within the peeling bark.

Not a branch or tree or fruit or flower but had a story to tell, though some slyly kept half their secrets, and told the rest only on compulsion.

Even a slab of mould rescued from

Noute's trowel became, beneath John's microscope and through his delightful talks, a wonder-land better than a fairy's wood, because its inhabitants were real, living, breathing, working creatures. Its trees came up and grew and died. Its soil was our own earth, moist or dry, healthy or not, according to the sun, the winds, the rain, scourge, or earthquake—the last represented by Noute's destroying hand.

Babette's little world, bounded by four streets and including but five persons in its community all told, may seem rather small; but when John had opened the doors of a dozen wonder-worlds to her, not counting the history-stories to be traced out on maps in the big geography, she found her acquaintance widening day by day, until it was far more extensive and interesting than the gay circles of many children who go out into the great world and see strange sights with but half-open eyes.

Let the boy who doubts this put a good microscope in his pocket, and the first time he treads on an ant-hill and recovers from his first impulse to run—or even if he has run, let him come back, turn his glass into down-trodden and panic-stricken Ant-

ville, and study the inhabitants for a little while. If he does not come away with a more kindly feeling for the poor despised little creatures than he ever had before, there will be something wrong with the boy.

Babette's mind was soon as eager in its interest in all her new studies as her heart was in its sympathies.

John McDonald's "experiment" had very soon proven a success.

And so let us leave Babette awhile in this happy atmosphere of affection and improvement, with a devoted "aunt" to mother her, a doting "*oncle*" to idolize and nearly spoil her, a faithful tutor to direct her young mind into channels of elevating thought, Noute to receive little kindnesses at her hands, keeping her heart tender through the blessedness of giving—let us leave her here, safe among refining influences, as if in answer to the prayers of her own people, while we go in search of those who still hope and pray that she may some day be restored to their loving arms.

The Le Charmants were still living in France. At the end of the first year—the



"A WONDERLAND BETTER THAN A FAIRY'S WOOD"



time originally set for their return—Colonel Le Charmant felt that to come back would be folly. His wife's health had improved, the children were all well placed at the best schools, and as for his business it had never done half so well when represented by an agent. And so, year after year, they had stayed until the question of their return began to change from "Why *not* go?" to "Why go?" Thus the years passed—ten, eleven, twelve, thirteen. Two of the daughters were grown and married—Clothilde in Paris, and the eldest, 'Toinette, to an American, who had brought her back to New York.

So the family were scattered, and when one day Colonel Le Charmant came home and said, "We must go back 'home'—to America," the mother, without a word of disagreement or protest, willingly turned her face towards the land to which one child had already returned, and which still held the last fragmentary hope of yet recovering the dear lost Babette.

The old house down in the French quarter seemed to wake from a thirteen years' sleep on the day the news came to prepare for the family.

Passers along the street, who had grown accustomed to its blank, expressionless front, were startled one morning to see the banisters along the broad galleries hung with rugs and mats, while a yellow woman, her head tied up in a towel, energetically mopped the cobwebs from transoms and ceilings. The old home was waking up, wiping its eyes after a long sleep, shaking itself and stretching.

When, three weeks later, two carriages rolled up to its gate one evening, it was wide-awake, washed and combed, and in *costume de rigueur* for the occasion.

As one looked at its brightly lighted windows, it seemed all eyes to greet the returned—all arms to embrace them, as he glanced at its broad open balcony and stairway.

A rushing, jabbering, laughing, weeping lot of cousins—cousins to the most distant remove—flocked out to the gate to receive them, followed by a troop of old family servants, with their children and grandchildren—black, brown, yellow, tan; turbaned, aproned, beflowered, and befeathered—the younger standing timidly back, while the older ones clasped the waists and knees of

the mother and grandmother, or, gathering up the children bodily, carried them into the house.

These last were of the turbaned sort, who still don their white aprons for full-dress occasions, and simply tie an extra frill into their *tignons* and polish their hoop earrings for a christening or wedding.

Excepting the few who had been summoned back "home" to anticipate their return, the crowd of servants were living about, mainly in the service of the Le Charmant connection. But that did not hinder their coming for this important and exciting occasion to swell the welcoming group. And they would all drop in again from time to time after the arrival of the trunks, and not one would find herself forgotten.

But what a time there was to-night! What a babel!

Arthé, who promised to be the runt of the family, had shot up like an Easter lily, until her flower-like face turned itself down in the same fashion as the flower, as she bent to kiss her cousin Fifine, born the same day. Marie and another cousin were placed back to back to measure the advantage gained on either side.

The old pencil-marks, with the names annexed, were found on the library door-facing, and the mother ran with a merry face to compare heights with the long-ago measurements. Nobody seemed to have stood quite still. *Maman* was "just a weeny bit taller" than the old mark. "Ah, but her heels were higher!" "G'an" had grown down-hill.

It was great fun, and yet, while she laid a book above the young heads as they presented themselves, the mother's face lost its merry smile, and a quiet pallor took its place when, having measured the last applicant, she turned sadly away.

Away down, lower than the rest, against a dimly pencilled line, she had found written in clear letters, "*Babette*."

Early the next morning the children—children still, though several topped their handsome mother by a "so-much"—were out of bed, wandering about the grounds, investigating—noting the changes of the years.

The magnolia-trees, with all their stately growth, had kept young, polished, and modern; the crêpe-myrtles, remembered as blushing as pink-cheeked school-girls, had taken to themselves long gray beards, through which

the coral bloom showed here and there like toothless gums ; the rose-vines had climbed, and the orange-trees died.

The older children remember these things, and the younger ones, listening, think they do. Even the two born in France begin, in a few days, to "remember" various things about the old home, much to the amusement of the entire family.

The home-coming is only a gala occasion for the children, but for the mother and grandmother, following them from place to place with subdued smiles and a languid interest, it is full of reminders, in every nook and corner, of the little lost one, whose name neither has found courage to speak.

Thirteen years have whitened the mother's hair, and her quiet, sweet face tells its own story of submission and trust.

It is a time of diversion and new interests for all.

The parlors are faded, dingy, and old-fashioned ; they must be renovated. The house needs a new room here—a balcony must be added there.

While they readjust themselves to the old home and its conditions, let us leave them, and go back to the iron gate of Dr. Bondu-

rante — “but a stone’s-throw away,” as one might say.

Our heart gives a bound, and we wonder what have been the changes of the eight years that have passed since we took leave of the happy circle within, while with unsteady fingers we raise the heavy knocker, and it falls with a ringing clank!

CHAPTER XI

THE sound of the old knocker is as startling as the voice of a friend heard after a long absence.

While a host of misty pictures of the past rise before us at its sound, and we wait with trembling heart for the appearance of an expected form or face, a subtile odor comes from the old garden like a breath. It brings so keen a sense of the real presence of scenes dear and familiar that we almost hope to see the picturesque little figure of Babette, in flowing hair and long pantalets, tripping across the yard as of old.

The breath is the garden's own. In it are the pollen-dusts of a half-dozen flowering vines; the pungent fragrance of coral magnolia seed—one crushed here and there by a passing foot; the leathery smell of the tanned flower-leaves curling in rolls upon the dank grass, amid a waste of odorous pollen-tipped "matches" from the cone-heart of the fallen blossoms. Clumps of freckled pump-

kin-colored tiger-lilies give prodigally to both bee and air of their mustard hearts, and masses of violets cluster along shaded borders. There is the odor of the swinging moss, and the suspended wasp-nest contributes its musty danger-smell. Adown the walks an occasional tiny heap of newly cut grass is topped by a fresh slab of mould, emitting its earthy breath, and inviting the sparrow to dine on its panic-stricken inhabitants.

We recognize the same old pattern of the bricklayer's fancy along the walks, outlined in a flat green ribbon of closely clipped cocoa-grass, while an occasional shoot holds up a defiant pair of blades, recalling the old woman who would say "scissors."

There are changes in the house's front. Two great windows have opened through the solid wall of ivy on its parlor side, and from the narrow opening between its bowed shutters fleecy curtains of snowy lace float in and out in the breeze. The tall white urns guarding the front steps have given up their volunteer crops of purslane and golden-rod, and are aglow with scarlet geraniums and trailing garlands of money-wort. The old doctor's arm-chair has disappeared from the balcony.

How quickly the eye takes in all these things, recognizing familiar features, and noting the changes far more quickly than one is able to recount them.

The echo of the knocker seems still in our ears when the front door opens and the blinking face of Noute appears. Turning back as he sees us, he seizes a card-tray, and as he comes forward now and opens the gate he presents it with the explanation that "No one may come in to-day. Madame is no better. Everybody is asked to leave a card."

Noute the deaf, the dumb, is hearing, and has spoken; and now, in answer to further inquiry, he goes on to say:

"Oh yas, Mamzelle Bébée is dhere, and me an' Clarisse, and anudder woman—a sick-nurse—and of course Dr. McDonald—"

"And the doctor—?"

"Ah yes, certainly, Dr. McDonald and anudder, and some days still anudder comes—"

"But Dr. Bondurante?"

"Dr. Bondurante! Ah-h-h!" Tears start afresh, and are quickly bestowed along the length of his sleeve, as he exclaims, after the manner of the Bondurante household, under pressure of emotion, "Ah-h-h! Poor Dr.

Bondurante! Since t'ree—" (three weeks or three years, he is not sure which) "Dr. Bondurante, he is dead; or, maybe, it is t'ree months yet. Mamzelle Bébée was so high; to-day she stands—" And Noute the "foolish" raises his hand from his first low measurement in a wavering, uncertain way, indicating Babette's supposed height, now even with his own chin, now at his nose's tip, and now between the two.

"I t'ink it is t'ree weeks past," he continues, after a moment of blinking uncertainty, "or, maybe, t'ree mont's. T'ree times de yellow roses come since. He was asleep in de swing."

Poor Noute's wandering efforts at explanation are unsatisfactory and puzzling—nay, more, they are painful.

As we turn away, our eyes fall for the first time upon a bright sign on the left side of the gate. It is so near that we start upon discovering it almost against our shoulder. "Dr. John McDonald" is its simple inscription. Only a doctor's sign, nothing more, and yet it tells a new chapter in our story.

An aged shopkeeper, a hunchback, who lives directly across the street, tells us the rest.

Needless to say his native tongue is French—he is a creole—and having said this, still more superfluous is it to add that he is polite and kindly.

“Since t’ree years pass,” he begins, drawing out a stool and offering it, “the old doctor went one day to sleep in his hammock. When they found him it was the month of Mary, and yellow lady-bank roses lay one over another on all the vines, and the flowers Mamzelle Bébée had laid in his arms were yet fresh.

“Mamzelle Bébée was not there when they went to wake him. She had gone an hour before with Ma’am McDonald—the mother to the young Dr. McDonald—to the La-fourche country. Only one yellow-fever case was reported at the quarantine, and they sent mamzelle away, so much afraid, remembering how it robbed them before.

“When she ran to tell her uncle good-bye he was asleep, and she did not wake him, only filled his arms with the flowers, and, kissing his hair, left him so. The flowers would tell him she had said good-bye, and she would soon be back. This was at the end of May only, and yet Ma’am Bondurante would not let mamzelle come home

until the frost. T'ree times they have sent her there, and every time she goes and comes she is prettier than the last time, and sweeter. When this time she came back to find the doctor gone—they never wrote her of his death—madame was afraid if she grieved she might be ill; but when she came and saw madame alone, and so changed and sad, she said she would never leave her again. And she has kept her word.

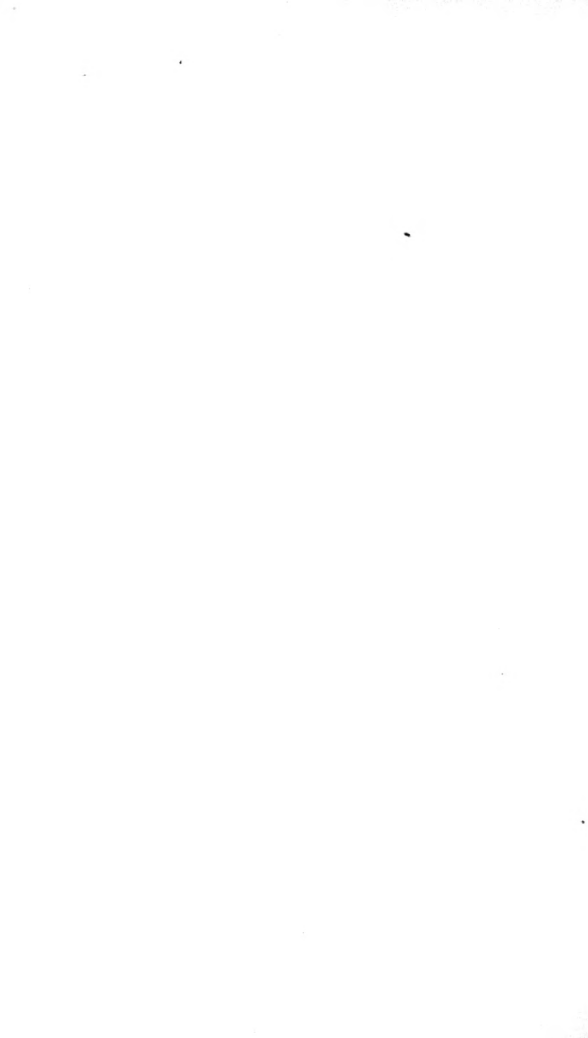
“Ma'am Bondurante is never the same since then, and but for mamzelle they say she would not be here now. 'Tis true mamzelle is her niece, but many daughters are not so loving. And she is so beautiful—so good to the poor!

“Everyw'ere you see the little old lady walk—along the *galerie*, through the yard—mamzelle is walking by her side, holding her arm maybe, or laughing. They are like two morning-glories—madame of yesterday's blooming, shrivelled and old; mamzelle, rising above her, as a dew-tipped flower just expanded and catching the first sun.

“Ah, well! We will see them so never again, I believe. So the nurse, Madelaine, she tells me. To-day, or to-morrow at the



"BUT FOR MAMZELLE THEY SAY SHE WOULD NOT BE
HERE NOW"



latest, she will pass. And mamzelle, they say she will be the heir. She deserves it, yes—if she got twice more yet. Same as mother and father—and, like I said, *better than many*—she loved that old aunt and uncle.

“And Dr. McDonald? Ask the neighborhood. Everybody, black and w’ite, love to see him pass in and out. And many fine positions he has refuse in the ‘Charity Hospital,’ the ‘Hôtel Dieu.’ And in other cities, even, they want him. But he will not leave Ma’am Bondurante and mamzelle. But he has plenty practice. Even the old doctors send for him. He makes a great deal of money; *mais*, he gives half away. If he and mamzelle—of course everybody’s business is for himself; but if only he and mamzelle—it would be a pretty match. They are a beautiful pair when they stand together in the garden—she, so dark, so laughing, always making fun; he, tall, fair, serious. If only the old people could have lived to see that!”

The garrulous old dealer in paper flowers, holy candles, rosaries, and “religious articles” in general, would have talked all day to a patient listener.

These were, indeed, trying times for Babette; and when she had at last, a few days later, returned from the funeral of her benefactress to the great silent house, she felt lonely indeed. But she was not friendless, even though her circle was small. John had been kind and thoughtful all the way through; and now, when she had given Clarisse her bonnet and wrap, and was turning to go into her own room, she was surprised with a new evidence of his thoughtfulness.

As soon as he had realized that the end was near, he had sent for his mother to come, and fearing lest Babette should be disturbed with preparations for her entertainment, he had said nothing of it to her.

Mrs. McDonald, with whom she had spent several happy summers, was her dearest friend. If she had been told to ask for the one thing in the world that would comfort her in her great sorrow, it would have been to have this friend come to her now.

And here she was. She had come while they were away. With hands affectionately extended, but with her sweet and womanly face as serene as always, in dark days as in bright, she came forward to meet her; and when John came in, a moment afterwards,

and found them quietly talking together, he knew that her coming had been a blessing.

Babette had been through a long and weary experience, and for a week after Mrs. McDonald came she kept her bed. This long rest and quiet, with kind and cheerful attention from the entire household, was her best restorative. Noute, always anxious when any one was ill, was all attention now. The poor fellow, with only his poor half-wit to help him to an understanding of things, had nevertheless made some progress. He had learned that he was not to be sent away, and that when Mamzelle Bébée had gone away in the summer-time, she had come back again.

He would even go himself on an errand into the street. Indeed, in the depth of his trousers pocket Noute had, for some years, carried the front-gate key. The day the old doctor gave it to him was probably the proudest in his whole life. The first use he made of it was to go out, lock the gate after himself, take a walk up and down the square, or rather a run, ending with several somersaults, and then to unlock the gate again and come in, grinning with delight. This performance he repeated daily, until the freedom of the gate had become a familiar hon-

or, and he could accept it calmly, standing with the key in his hand in the open gate. After a time, however, even this had lost its novelty. Life and its interests were inside the enclosure, and the key lay quietly in his pocket, to be used when necessary.

Noute was never anxious about the future. He did not ask himself, as did every other member of the household, what Babette would do, now that she was alone. He only knew each day that "to-day" she was lying in bed—not strong enough to be up—and so "to-day" for him was spoiled. He could bring flowers to her door and ice-water, or the morning paper, or he could beg Clarisse to fix a glass of orange-flower syrup for him to take to her, and between times he could sit outside her door on the floor and think—and blink—and wait.

While there had been other illnesses in the family, Noute had been ever willing and anxious to serve; but when not needed in the house he would seize his trowel and go out to fight the cocoa-grass in the garden.

During Babette's illness the cocoa-grass had things its own way, and straightway proceeded to fence off every brick from its neighbor.

For a whole week Noute sat at Babette's door, and on the day she finally appeared, dressed and apparently well again, he went through his usual gymnastic performances up and down the back yard, and then, seizing his trowel, quietly went back to his work at the cocoa-grass.

Life had begun again. At the end of a second week it was necessary for Mrs. McDonald to return to her home, and, by the physician's advice, Babette consented to go with her for a short time. The entire change of air and scene would bring back the roses to her cheeks, and when she should be quite strong again she would think of her future. For the present John remained in the home, retaining his office in the doctor's study as before.

It was not many days before the hunch-back's words regarding the property proved to be true. Indeed, his name was found signed as one of the witnesses to the brief will which John found among some papers committed to his keeping, to be opened only after Madame Bondurante's death. This paper, drawn up by herself, simply and unequivocally left everything to her "beloved niece, Marie Bondurante." This John wrote her as soon as he discovered it; but Babette

was troubled by thoughts that no one knew.

The only respect in which her beloved Tantine had ever seemed unkind to her or inconsiderate was in a certain reticence as to her relationship. Babette was quite small when she discovered that any questions about her own parentage brought a sad expression to her aunt's face, and that these questions were answered only when pressed. And sometimes—she had tried to think herself mistaken—sometimes the reluctant answers, given at long intervals, did not quite agree. Indeed, the poor old lady had more than once repeated them in the confessional—but even here only as abstract sins.

Long before the doctor's death Babette had often resolved to make a serious appeal for the whole truth, but the very suspicion of mystery had made it hard to do. Then, when the old lady began to fail in health, it had been quite impossible to distress her.

And so she had died, and Babette was quite alone, knowing only that there was concerning herself a painful mystery. She hoped that possibly the will would explain things. Her name betrayed nothing. The doctor and his wife were, she knew, distant

cousins. Both were Bondurantes. Had her father or mother—or both—offended and been cast out of the family record? It was very strange. She was sure, moreover, that there was a period of her life with which both her aunt and uncle were unfamiliar. She was greatly troubled now, her last hope having failed. The will had told nothing. She was coming into a fortune through a doubtful relationship, and the subject preyed upon her mind until she resolved to write to John about it.

To no human soul had she ever hinted her unhappiness before. Her pride had kept her silent even when she was a child, but now she felt that she must have advice, and perhaps aid, in unravelling her life's secret. Her first impulse naturally led her to confide in him who had been beside her, first as teacher, and then as counsellor and friend, during nine long and happy years.

And so the letter was written—a long and detailed account of her life, so far as she knew it, with all the little discrepancies in the story as told her, all her misgivings, and her own detached and imperfect memories upon which many of them were founded. She even told him about the mysterious

bundle of clothing. She held back nothing.

By a strange coincidence, on the evening of the day before this letter reached John McDonald, something happened at the homestead to confirm his own suspicion that there was another story of Babette's life back of the one commonly believed. He, too, had innocently asked one or two natural questions when he first came to live at the Bondurantes', and then he had learned to keep silent.

While he sat reading as usual in his office this evening, Noute squatted in his favorite position flat upon the floor against the wall, hugging his knees and talking to himself. This had been his habit ever since he had learned the use of his tongue, and John would not have noticed it had he not heard the name, "Mamzelle Bébée," repeated at intervals. It was impossible that John should not listen alertly, hearing this name. No one, not even the girl herself, knew any other than the name to which she had awakened in the Bondurante home. She was to herself only, as to others, "Marie Bondurante," familiarly known as *Bébée*.

Noute's talk, even when not embarrassed

by the consciousness of a listener, was rambling, and his sentences disconnected. Noute the foolish of old was Noute the foolish still. It was hard to make anything of talk like this:

"Rain come down—wind blow, Z-z-z! Gate fly open—bang! Old devil shoot inside with Mamzelle Bébée!"

This seemed to give him special pleasure, for he repeated it over and over with slight variations, always laughing with delight at the end of the recital.

After listening awhile, John raised his head and began to question him. Nothing could have pleased the simple-minded fellow better than this. He began the story over again; and this time he commenced by saying:

"Mamzelle is *so* big"—he raised his hand even with the door-knob. "She is burning sick. The old devil run with her in the rain—in the wind. It is cold. I run behind—watch where she go—the big gate comes open—I shove her in, so—bang!"

Rising now and throwing himself forward, he imitated the motion of pushing the old gypsy into the gate. Noute, it must be remembered, was the only living person who had ever known how she had gotten in. It

seemed an improbable story—and it was very incomplete—and yet, coming just at this time, immediately after Babette's letter, it seemed to confirm his fears. There was surely a strange mystery connected with her life.

If Noute knew anything of value to the story, he did not have the knowledge on demand. He did not even seem to know when, in describing this incident, a new item tumbled into it, as if by accident, or that the whole recital had any serious meaning.

After thinking over the matter, and failing to get anything coherent from Noute, John resolved to try Clarisse.

"What was the first name of mademoiselle's father, Clarisse?" he asked next morning, scanning her face covertly as he did so.

Clarisse started nervously at the question, rolled her eyes and crossed herself, as she answered :

"Me, I don' know nuthing 't all about it, M'sieu Jean. God knows, Mamzelle is one sweet, sweet young lady ; but for such as dat, I know *nuthing 't all about it !*"

And the very vehemence with which she denied all knowledge proved beyond a doubt that she did know something which she would not tell.

CHAPTER XII

THE more John pondered over the subject, the more convinced he became that Babette's life held a carefully guarded secret. Those who loved her best had kept it sacredly. Would it be wise for her welfare or happiness to oppose his judgment to theirs, and to advise her to seek an explanation? Would it not be better, seeing that in everything else they had shown their devotion, to assume that they had acted with affectionate wisdom in this, and to accept the situation without question? But, on the other hand, was it possible for a proud and sensitive girl to rest contentedly in a doubtful position, not knowing her own parentage even, when, by prompt effort, it might be possible to discover the truth?

His position as adviser was a hard one. It would have been difficult even if he had had only a casual interest in Babette; but her happiness meant much to him, and he feared the effect of some possible, painful discov-

ery about herself. This was why his answer to her letter advised her—very much against his own inclination, for he longed to know the truth—to trust her happiness to those who had loved her rather than risk it by opposing them. He dared not advise otherwise, and yet in his heart he almost hoped she would take the other course. There was information within reach. Clarisse could give it if she would. Perhaps she could explain Noute's incoherent and mysterious recitals, which undoubtedly hinted a true story.

Babette received John's letter just as she and Mrs. McDonald were preparing to return to the city. And so it was not answered; and John did not know, until he saw her again, that his advice had only given her pain.

"I am not seeking for happiness," she said, sadly, as she stood beside him in the old office; "I want simply to know the truth. For the first time in my life I must act for myself, and I must begin with an honest understanding of my position—if I can."

Finding her mind fully decided, John then told her all he knew. But she had already

resolved to try to find out some clew to things from Noute. That he was associated in some way with the unknown period of her life she felt sure. She even seemed to remember him upon a sea-shore with strange people. He had brought her shells and pebbles, confirming this impression. And then there was the mysterious bundle of clothing. Perhaps if he should see this again, it would help him to recall the past.

Babette had not told Mrs. McDonald of her secret. It was too sacred, too terrible a thing to confide to any one beside the one friend who had shared all her joys and sorrows since her childhood—all, excepting this, which had, until now, been only a sleeping, half-confessed sorrow. As soon as it had taken shape as a definite trouble, she had told him all about it, and he had promised to help her.

It was some time before an opportunity came to speak with Noute without fear of interruption. She wanted John to be present, so that he could carefully note every word and help her to draw conclusions; or, perhaps, he would put a timely question to the simple-minded fellow that would draw out some new revelation.

It was Mrs. McDonald's habit to take a nap in the afternoons, but this was the time Clarisse usually pottered about the house, setting things to rights by a touch here and there, and seeming to be everywhere at once.

It took a little manœuvring on Babette's part to engage the old woman in the back part of the house, pressing over some dresses which she would probably never wear, while she called Noute into the office where John was already waiting, and prepared, with beating heart, for the cross-examination whose result no one could foretell.

"Come, Noute, and tell me where you got this," she said, by way of introduction, as she laid the little bundle of clothing upon the table.

Noute sprang to his feet with delight at sight of the familiar parcel, and seizing it, threw it upon the bookcase. Then he slipped out of the door, and returned in a moment, creeping on all-fours and looking anxiously about him as if fearing detection. Then, stealthily climbing up and stealing the bundle, he hid it in his bosom and retreated to the centre of the room, where he began going through the motions of shifting sail and guiding a boat. Finally, after a series of

quick movements, he ran up to Babette, laid the bundle at her feet, and rolled over on the floor, laughing.

Noute's words came slowly, and when his mind moved with rapidity he seemed to find more fluent expression in his old habit of gesticulation. He had illustrated his stealing the clothing from the rafters in Nick's shed-room, the journey across the water, and, finally, his bringing it to Babette.

It was not bad acting to illustrate a story already known, but how little it told of the one they were seeking to discover! Even when Noute was induced to answer questions his words were often misleading, and always inadequate.

What, for instance, could be more unsatisfactory than this list of items, which were written upon John's memorandum when the conference was over?

"Clothes found 'in the wood.'

"'The devil' put them there.

"'The devil' was a woman.

"She was 'old.'

"She was 'ugly.'

"She was 'not all bad—some good.'

"She 'made Mamzelle Bébée some tea.'

"She walked 'like this' (limping).

"There were 'one, three, five, eight, nine little devils by the water.'

"'One was sleeping in Mamzelle Bébée's bed, and he threw her out.'

"'The devil carried Mamzelle in the rain.'

"He 'pushed her in the gate.'

"And he 'took the old devil back home in the boat.'"

Such was the hopeless testimony.

When Noute had known the gypsy woman, names had meant nothing to him. It is possible that when he called her "the old devil" he meant no special harm. His language-teachers had been principally Uncle Tom and Clarisse, to whom all poor and miserable creatures were "poor devils."

Having failed to get any satisfaction from Noute, Babette resolved to try Clarisse. She was determined that the old woman should tell what she knew, but how to approach her was the question. Babette was really fond of her in a certain way, and had never had occasion to doubt her affection for herself. While she hesitated as to the manner of her appeal fortune favored her.

Clarisse became suddenly ill, and thought herself likely to die. Then, "that her soul might rest in peace," she told Babette the

whole story of her life since the night when "an old woman, who looked like an Italian," had deserted her there, a little sick child, wet through to the skin in a terrible storm. This was all any one knew.

If Clarisse repented her confession as soon as she was well again, it was too late for her to retract. Her word had been given under pressure of circumstances that established its truth beyond a doubt.

Each word she had spoken had fallen like lead upon the heart of the poor lonely girl who had demanded the whole truth, thinking herself prepared to know the worst. But now that she had heard it, she realized that it was far more humiliating than anything she had feared. Somehow it had not occurred to her that even her name might not be hers—that she could be an utter alien, having no real claim of relationship upon those who had given her all—that the period of her life of which her "aunt" and "uncle" had known nothing was *all of it* up to the hour of her adoption.

It was a bitter discovery, and yet there was relief in it, inasmuch as it made clear what seemed to her the path of duty.

Whether her notions were strained or not

—whether, stickling for the letter of truth, she would sacrifice what, through its spirit, was truly hers—there may be differences of opinion. But as soon as she had heard Clarisse's story, she knew that she could never touch a penny of the money left to "Madame Bondurante's niece."

John was never so proud of her as when she told him of her resolution. As she stood before him clothed in black from throat to toe, and unaffectedly confided to him all the pitiful story, he thought he had never seen a human face so refined and beautiful.

She spoke with a placid composure born of the intensity of her feelings—told him of her decision and of all her modest plans for the future which she was resolved to meet bravely as a penniless orphan, supporting herself by teaching.

John keenly felt his responsibility as her adviser at this critical moment. He knew all the circumstances, and was much troubled in his own mind with doubts. While he rejoiced in the nobility of character which moved her to surrender everything to a principle, he questioned her position somewhat. Madame Bondurante had given of her own, knowing exactly what she did. Was not

Bébé, in declining it, tripping on a mere technicality? Was she not robbing herself for a strained idea of right? He feared that she was, and was constrained to tell her so, even though while he spoke he felt that his words were vain.

An expression of deep pain passed over her face as she answered him: "But I am not Madame Bondurante's niece. My dear, blessed Tantine was only my benefactress—not my aunt."

She had begun bravely, but now her lip quivered and her eyes filled with tears as she said: "It is better that I should have work to do. It will keep me from thinking. Besides, I want to work. My poor Italian father and mother—"

These were hard words for her to say, and her voice trembled, and she bit her lip. For only a moment did her emotion master her, however.

"My poor parents were working-people. I have been proud—proud of my family—of my blood—hating unrefinement, and I"—she raised her head like a queen as she went on—"I am proud yet, but not of such as this. Even if prosperity came again—if I found *Clarisse's* story all a dream—I would

take my happiness humbly, I think; but I am proud of something within me which tells me my own people were honest. Let me accept my true life—the life that comes to the child of misfortune and poverty. You have taught me many things—the best I definitely know. But for you I could not put my feelings now into words, or know why I am sure I am right. My beloved foster-parents gave me many beautiful standards of thought and life, and I shall love and honor them till I die; but this—this instinct of independence and pride is a transmitted gift. If my poor mother deserted me, she sacrificed herself to lay me in a softer bed than hers. She put me into the eager arms of a hungry-hearted mother and fled—out into the rain and storm, childless. She was a martyr—a saint. Why should I be ashamed?"

Bright red spots had mounted her cheeks as she proceeded, and when at last she stopped, John, looking at her, felt a sob rising in his own throat.

Little *Bébé*—sweet, playful, pretty, amiable *Bébé*—had never shown the brave spirit that was in her as she had done to-night. She looked so small, so young, so beautiful.



“BUT I AM NOT MADAME BONDURANTE'S NIECE”

There was something regal in the indomitable pride with which she took her lowly position.

In John's eyes she seemed both the holy things she had called her own mother; and it was with this feeling, and that no matter what should come to her he would love and protect her always, that he took her hand and raised it reverently to his lips.

"My sweet, brave little sister," were the only words he said. He had called her "little sister" playfully on occasion many a time before, but never with the same protecting love, the same intensity of feeling.

Babette did not feel that it would be best to assign her reasons for the position she had taken.

The name, Marie Bondurante, was the only one she knew. It had been lovingly bestowed. She would keep it, and make no explanations to any one. Not even to her friend Mrs. McDonald did she tell the pitiful half-story of her life. It was enough that John knew, and that he respected if he did not advise the course upon which she had decided.

In a short but dignified note to the Bondurante lawyer she formally relinquished

all right to the estate. She gave no reason—asked no advice.

The old lawyer was naturally thunder-struck, and hastened to see her, protesting most earnestly against what no doubt seemed to him an insane act.

“Excuse me, mademoiselle, but it is unprecedented—it is insane, if you will allow me. And, besides, you are not of age. A child cannot rob herself. The laws of Louisiana, like those of *la belle France*, are kind to the orphan and widow. What would you do—you a young, delicate girl—a flower of the conservatory—what would become of you alone, penniless, in this cruel world? Ah! Bah! It cannot be done!”

“That, monsieur, is the question that comes afterwards. I do what seems right to me, and then deal as well as I can with results. As to my age, in ten days I shall be eighteen. You may come again if you wish, but you will find me unchanged.”

The old man looked at her with a keen scrutiny. What manner of nineteenth-century maiden was this that had crossed his crooked old path?

She was surely good to look upon—as beautiful a maid as the brightest dream of

his youth ever brought before his closed eyes in sleep, more lovely than any of the daughters of the notably lovely women among whom he lived.

He scratched his old head nervously as he went out. He felt somewhat as a naturalist does who discovers a new specimen. He did not know just how to label her.

One thing was certain, however. He would take his time about making it known. She might yet come to her senses.

He went again to see her—not once, but several times. He consulted her friends. Mrs. McDonald truly said she knew nothing of her reasons. John was quite sure she was fully persuaded in her own mind. Both were entirely satisfied of her sanity.

The old lawyer's last visit of protest was as unsatisfactory as the first. She assured him quietly that she had not taken her position thoughtlessly. She knew it meant poverty, homelessness, work.

Indeed, she was quite decided just what work she would seek, and perhaps, since he was so kind, he would help her to find a position to teach.

He finally saw that further argument was useless; but in his musty office he pondered

much upon the beautiful girl who, from his point of view, seemed bent on her own destruction.

Mrs. McDonald, seeing that John did not oppose her, said little on the subject, though she used all her powers of persuasion to urge Babette to spend at least one year with her in her country home before setting out to earn her living.

"I have no girl," she pleaded; "come with me, dear, and be my daughter."

This was a great temptation, but, having decided to face the new life squarely, promptly, unflinchingly, she felt that this would be somewhat of a retreat. She was firm in her determination to teach. Indeed, her peculiar education fitted her exceptionally well for special teaching. Although her pronunciation of English was sometimes delightfully Frenchy, her knowledge of its grammar and literature was thorough.

The old lawyer, finally realizing that his eloquence was of no avail, paid her one more visit—this time a visit of another sort. He declared himself one minute "vexed, baffled, furious;" the next, "ready to wash his hands of the whole affair;" and then, having spent his anger, he proceeded, with a kindliness of

tone that belied his words, to tell her that "since she was bent on suicide, he had brought her a rope to hang herself with."

Such was the old Frenchman's way of designating the offer of a position which he had brought her.

He had not yet submitted her name. He wished to be quite sure that she was in earnest. Yes, he understood that her mind was made up—only he thought best to see her again. He had a friend, just returned with his family from a long residence in France—charming people, no better in the land. The sons and daughters, grown up abroad, needed a teacher speaking both languages to instruct them in English. If mademoiselle was really quite sure that she wished to assume poverty—if she would accept a teacher's position—here was an opening. He had been asked to recommend some one. If she were his own daughter, he could not place her in a more desirable home—so far as that went. Mademoiselle need not decide immediately. She should take her own time—a week, or even a month.

Needless to say Babette asked little time to consider a proposition like this, which seemed, in every way, a providential opening.

Six weeks later, when the old Bondurante homestead passed into the hands of the agent representing madame's wealthy kindred living in Paris, Dr. John McDonald's sign was transferred to an office across the street, where Noute was regularly installed as "office boy;" and Babette, parting affectionately with Mrs. McDonald, and promising to come to her for a long visit at the end of the year, stepped into the carriage sent for her and was driven around to the handsome home of Colonel Le Charmant, where, in her own father's house, she was to enter upon her life of independence as English teacher to her sisters and brothers who had grown up in France.

CHAPTER XIII

IT was a sad little group of three who stood at the Bondurante gate watching the back of the carriage that carried the lovely little mistress of the manse away from them.

Uncle Tom leaned heavily on his walking-cane, and only grunted his objections to the whole proceeding ; while Clarisse, poor old soul, paying no heed to the great tears that coursed adown her fat cheeks, kept wiping her hands on her apron over and over again. Somehow, although she had heard absolutely nothing, she connected Babette's going away to teach with her own confession, and she blamed herself. If any one else, under the circumstances, had been betrayed into giving this testimony, even in the presence of death, she would have denounced her as unworthy the trust. And so now she denounced herself. This was why, instead of weeping tears of simple, unmixed sorrow over the final breaking up of the home, she stood remorsefully watching the receding carriage with

quivering lips that tried to frame a prayer for many blessings to descend upon Mamzelle's head in compensation for the wrong she had done her. This was why she was heedless of her tear-stained face, and stood nervously expressing her powerless protest in her old way—wiping and wiping her hands.

Noute leaned against the gate-post, his tearless eyes blinking suspiciously, until the carriage was nearly out of sight, and then, with a wild cry, as if of pain, he sprang forward and ran after it as fast as he could go. He had no trouble in keeping the carriage in sight until it stopped at last at the Le Charmant gate.

John and his mother had driven with Babette to her new home, and when they had left her there they proceeded to the depot, where Mrs. McDonald took the train for her own home.

When Noute, standing afar off, saw the gate close and the carriage drive away, leaving Babette within, he turned and went slowly back home—not to his new home with John McDonald, but back to the Bondurante house, where he found Clarisse and Uncle Tom sitting silently, side by side, upon the

front porch, thus unconsciously advertising the fact that the old house was deserted.

Once more a great gate had closed between Noute and his beloved young mistress; but he had gained sufficiently in intelligence since the similar episode of years ago to know that he could not follow her now.

Clarisse and Uncle Tom had been retained for the present in charge of the old house and garden, and so Noute would always be a welcome guest there.

The three sat together to-day, saying very little, and when any one spoke it was only to remark upon some trivial matter, as when Uncle Tom said :

"I wonder for w'at dat brick is lif' itself dat-a-way in de walk yander. Bet a *pica-yune* one 'crevisse* try to push up one chimney 'gins' de underside dat brick—"

"Mo' like one doze nasty *taupe* try to work his road out so," said Clarisse.

"*Mais*, no, Clarisse; dat groun' ain't 'cross de lake, no—nuthing but *taupinière*.† You don't find no mole in dis damp, wet crawfish-mud. Mamzelle Taupe, she like to keep herself dry. W'at you tink, Noute?"

* Crawfish.

† Mole-hills.

"Me! I don't tink nutt'ing," was poor Noute's over-true reply; and if it held a bit of humor, none of the three knew it, as they lapsed into a silence, to be broken presently by a trivial remark from Uncle Tom about the weather.

So, avoiding the subject that filled their minds—because it was too sorrowful to trust themselves to talk about yet—they chatted idly on until nearly dark, when John McDonald's carriage stopped at the door opposite. Then Noute sprang from his seat and ran over to report for duty.

After Babette, Noute cared more for John, or for "Dr. Jean," as he called him, than for any one else in the world. If Mamzelle Bébée had gone away to live in another house among strange people, Dr. Jean had taken her there. It must be right.

If Noute himself had consented to leave Mamzelle's service and go to work for Dr. Jean, she had told him to do it, and of course it *was right*.

She had gone to live in a more pretentious house than the Bondurante home even. Noute and the doctor had taken narrower quarters. This satisfied his sense of the fitness of things. Just how much think-

ing he did it would be hard to say ; but certain it is that when he followed the carriage, if he had seen it leave Babette at any of the humble-looking houses that lined its course, there would have been trouble.

He knew the French quarter of the city in certain directions pretty well by this time, and he had often passed the Le Charmant gate and gazed in admiringly at the two cast-iron lions that guarded its front steps.

He had discovered one of them while the garden was overrun with weeds, while the family were still abroad.

A single ferocious-looking head had seemed to glare at him from a dense bower of honeysuckle vines that had enveloped the rest of the figure, and he had started back in fear, thinking it a living beast.

And then when, a day or two afterwards, he had come timidly to peep and see if the beast was still there, he had seen a little bird perch upon the iron mane, and he was so amused to find how he had been deceived that he threw up his hat and caught it, and turned somersaults half way down the block.

Then when the old garden had been trimmed and put in order for the family's

return, and another lion had seemed to step out on the opposite side of the steps, the two forming a noble guard to the stately portal, the place had seemed to him transformed into a palace.

If Noute had been told to select a home worthy of Mamzelle, he would have gone straight to the palace of the two lions. If he could have chosen his own home outside the Bondurante gate and away from Babette, he would have gone across the street only, where, from the front window or door, he could gaze into the old garden. He would have chosen to live with Dr. Jean.

Any time when he should be off duty, he could go over and sit and talk—or refuse to talk—with Clarisse and Uncle Tom, who were his friends and knew all his moods. And, too, he could exercise a sort of guardianship over the old garden, protecting certain mocking-birds' nests of which he knew, and the half-open magnolia buds against the depredations of the small boy. He could gather bouquets of roses and baskets of red and white camellias, and carry them around to the gate where the two lions were, and send them in to "Mamzelle Bé-

bée." All these things he could and did do during the weeks and months following; and indeed, sometimes, seeing the cocoa-grass, which he had kept in semi-subjection for so many years, laying siege with renewed vigor to its old ground, he would seize his trowel and open battle with it again in the old garden.

Sometimes—and these were red-letter days to the "poor foolish"—Dr. Jean would send him to carry a note to the house of the two lions, and then he would have the joy of asking to see Mamzelle herself, and of standing and blinking and grinning with delight while he awaited her answer.

Babette's life, in her chosen occupation, was from the first so busy that she found little time for repining, and yet there were times when the mystery of her life weighed very heavily upon her; and many nights, while the family were all asleep, a certain little bundle of clothing, tied with a blue cord and tassel, was wet with bitter tears.

Within the dainty white garments, yellowed with time, she had laid a shabby little dress of shrunken flannel and a pair of woolen stockings, faded and old. These things she had found hidden away in Madame Bon-

durante's *armoire*,* and Clarisse had told her that they were the garments she had worn when she was deserted by the old woman in the storm. Spreading them out upon her lap—the shabby clothes on one side, the dainty ones apart—she would study them over, wishing for power to read the mysterious story in which they both played so evident a part.

The Le Charmants were all more than kind, and the young sons and daughters soon became devotedly attached to their beautiful young governess.

Babette, although she grew fond of them all, was especially drawn towards the old grandmother. She reminded her of her beloved Tantine; but perhaps a deeper feeling lay in the fact that the heart-hungry girl unconsciously responded to the tenderness of the old lady for her.

Ever since the loss of her own granddaughter and godchild, the dear little Babette, the grandmother had regarded all girls of about her age with an affectionate interest.

She had wondered, as did all the family, what eccentric whim had influenced Miss Bondurante to decline her uncle's fortune;

* Wardrobe.

but as Babette never spoke of her own affairs, a sense of delicacy forbade their ever referring to them. Of course, they could ask no questions.

The pleasant relations between her and the Le Charmant daughters had soon ripened into personal friendships, which grew and strengthened with the months.

Dr. McDonald was now a handsome and popular young physician, growing in practice and popularity. It was but natural that he should have been much sought by society; but, though he was too busy and serious a man now to find time for such a life, or pleasure in it, he was a frequent and always welcome visitor at the Le Charmant home.

If the beautiful and sweet little governess had needed anything to add to her prestige, she would have found it in the devoted friendship of the popular and successful Dr. McDonald.

Babette had been for more than six months in her new home, and any one looking in upon her life there would surely have pronounced her perfectly happy.

Often in the late afternoons or evenings she could be seen, dressed in white muslin,

with a black ribbon about her waist, walking through the garden with one of the girls on either side of her, their arms about her waist; and the old grandmother, looking at them from her arm-chair on the porch, would think, "She reminds me of our own little one. If she is living, maybe she is just as tall now as Mademoiselle; and how sweetly she would fit in—just so—between the two, Arthé and Félicie!—Félicie born in France."

How long this half-happy state of affairs would have continued it would be hard to surmise had nothing unusual happened. But something very unexpected and terrible did suddenly occur. The little governess was taken violently ill. The old grandmother, already tenderly fond of the beautiful, lonely girl, was all devotion now.

"Maybe our own *Bébé* is sick somewhere among strangers," she said in her own heart as she sat beside her bed tenderly ministering to her wants.

Indeed, never since the child Babette had been lost had it been possible for her to do a kindness to any girl but she had done it in the lost child's name. Even when she had met poor little beggar-girls on her way to church in Paris, she had dropped a coin



"HOW SWEETLY SHE WOULD FIT IN—JUST SO—BETWEEN THE
TWO, ARTHÉ AND FÉLICIE!"

into their hands, thinking, "Maybe my poor little girl is begging somewhere."

For several long weeks Babette lay ill with brain-fever. She had never been very robust, and the tension of the mental strain through which she had passed had been very great. If anything recent had happened to bring on such an attack, no one knew it.

Some days she would lie in a stupor, seeming to recognize no one, while at other times she would start nervously, calling "*Maman!*" "*Tantine!*" or "*Nénaine!*"

One day while she lay apparently insensible, the grandmother, trying to rouse her to take some medicine, called "Mademoiselle Bondurante," as she had always done, when the sick girl, starting up and looking wildly about her, cried:

"No—not that! That is not my name! It is only borrowed! No—it is mine—it was a present—a pretty, pretty present. They gave me riches, too, but the riches didn't belong. Would you take what didn't belong? I have no name. Yes, I have two names. One day it is 'Blue Tassels,' and the next day it is only 'Woollen Stockings.' To-day it is 'Riches,' and to-morrow it is 'Poverty.' Which do you think belongs—'Blue Tas-

sels' or 'Woollen Stockings'? Tell me quick, before I forget."

The family gathered about her bed, frightened lest she might be dying, and sent away in haste for the family doctor, while a second messenger ran to tell Dr. McDonald.

The mother, Madame Le Charmant, leaned over her, bathing her head and trying to soothe her.

"Tell me, madame," she continued. "Tell me why I had no mother. But I had a godmother. It is my christening dress. Where is my godmother? She was a lady—I know by the little stitches—and the blue—"

They all wept silently, standing about the bedside, and the mother's tears fell upon the bosom of the sick girl's night-gown as she tenderly kissed her.

When the doctor came, he gave her a soothing potion.

"This is better than the stupor," he said. "It may be that the crisis is past. Let her be kept perfectly quiet."

As she gradually succumbed to the influence of the medicine, she continued to exclaim, in broken sentences:

"Miss Marie Blue Tassels—a pretty name!" Then, sobbing, the next minute she would

say: "Only a little beggar—but I am not ashamed. That is my crest—a pair of woollen stockings—ha, ha, ha!"

So she continued, at lengthening intervals, for nearly a half-hour, when she seemed nearly asleep; then, rousing suddenly, she clasped her forehead as if in pain.

The grandmother, seeing her growing drowsiness, had sent every one else out of the room. Turning now, she opened the *armoire* door and took from its shelf a bottle of cologne-water. She had done so before many times during the girl's illness, and yet, strange to say, she had never until now noticed on an under shelf a white bundle lying, tied about the outside with a blue cord and tassel, and beside it a pair of little woollen stockings. She started involuntarily at the sight, and as she made her way back to the bedside with the cologne, her old heart was thumping fiercely. She hardly knew what she thought, or hoped, or feared. As the old lady tenderly bathed Babette's temples with the cologne water she soon began to breathe regularly.

"I have a godmother, I know by the blue tassels. Kiss me, Nénaine," she murmured softly, as she at last dropped into sleep; and

neither knew that it was even her own god-mother, the "Nénaine" of her infancy, who gave the kiss she asked, her heart fairly trembling within her as she did so.

It seemed absurd for her to be so wrought up with a nameless hope. Was not the little governess a niece of Dr. Bondurante—old Dr. Bondurante whom everybody knew?

And yet, when she had noiselessly restored the bottle to its place, and, reaching down, took the mysterious little parcels in her hands, she trembled so that she could scarcely stand. She looked first at the shabby little checked flannel dress and faded woollen stockings; then she unrolled the other bundle, saw the little time-stained dress, felt the blue tassels, and then— A single quick scream escaped her as she clutched the *armoire* door for support.

Fearing that she might have disturbed the sick girl, she turned quickly and looked towards the bed. She was in a profound, peaceful sleep. The doctor's medicine had done its work.

But the family in the next room had heard and hurried to the door. Seeing their alarmed faces, the old lady threw up her arm in a silent, dramatic appeal for quiet, and, still con-

vulsively clasping the bundle of clothing, staggered out of the room.

The scene that followed baffles description. The little, long-lost garments finished the half-told story of the delirious girl. Even if the old lady had not recognized every twist and stitch of the old cord and tassels, the work of her own hands, the folded papers within the tassels would have supplied, by their well-preserved testimony, all needed proof of their identity.

In a few moments both mother and father were kneeling and sobbing silently at the bedside of poor little Babette, who slept on unconscious of the joyous answer that had been found to the hard question that had so disturbed her head. The younger ones, her sisters and brothers, unable to control themselves, ran to a distant room on the opposite side of the house, and wept aloud. Thither, too, ran the servants, adding their tears and cries of joy to the general thanksgiving. If dear old Tante Angèle could only have been there, too!

John soon arrived and the little French priest, both of whom had been sent for, and together they all wept tears of happiness, of praise, and of hope that the dear one

restored would soon awake to consciousness.

A blessed waking, indeed, awaited the lonely girl—to father, mother, sisters, and home; to the conscious possession of the dear grandmother, the “Nénaine” for whom she had called in her delirium; to a name of her own, recovered in her father’s house.

When, after a long and deep sleep, she finally opened her eyes, and looked feebly from one face to another, it was hard for the loving ones in attendance to guard their eyes, as well as their lips, lest they should tell the forbidden story. The doctor ordered the most perfect quiet, forbidding so much as a word, beyond the needs of the sick-room, for many days to come.

“Yes,” he said, “you must continue even to call her Miss Bondurante. She has passed through a terrible mental strain. I could not answer for the result of any shock in her enfeebled condition. She has come back to us. We must not let her slip from our arms again,” he added, tenderly pressing the grandmother’s hand as he left the room.

And so for two long weeks more they hovered lovingly about her bed, keeping the sweet secret with their lips, but telling it a

hundred times a day by yearning tender-
nesses; and many times the pillow beside
her head was wet with tears while she
slept.

Often as her sisters' faces lay against hers,
the mother and grandmother, overcome with
emotion as they looked at them, would have
to leave the room. "See how her sweet
face matches the others!" they would say.
"Why were we so blind as not to see it be-
fore?"

And the old grandmother, going into her
own room, would fall upon her knees at her
little *prie-dieu*, and sob her old heart out in
praise and thanksgiving.

Meanwhile the news had gone abroad over
all the city. The one place in which it had
not been told was the sweet flower-perfumed
chamber where the chief actor in the little
drama lay.

Finally, the time came when the doctor
consented that she should know the truth.
It was a trying ordeal, after all—to tell
her gently, quietly, without great emotion.
Each member of the family in turn was sug-
gested as the one most capable of self-con-
trol, and each fell to sobbing at the bare
thought. If they could have rushed to her,

open-armed and screaming with joy, it would have been easy enough.

At last the grandmother consented to bear the good news. Father and mother would sit beside the bed, but the irrepressible sisters and brothers should not be allowed to come in until they were called.

The father, creole-like, had brought a box of handsome jewels, marked in her full name, "Marie Babette Le Charmant;" and he entered the room and took his seat with the case in his hand. It would prepare her for a surprise.

Babette, dressed in a beautiful pink merino wrapper, and with a bunch of blush-roses pinned at her throat, sat propped up in lace-covered pillows. Her mother sat upon the bed beside her, the grandmother taking a low rocking-chair on the other side. The father drew his chair close beside the grandmother.

The old lady's face twitched pitifully as, taking Babette's thin hand in one of hers and laying the other fat palm on top of it, she said, "*Chérie*, we have some good news for you—good news for us all."

The mother's face was in the pillow in a moment, and the father's head fell upon his

trembling hand. Before the grandmother had been able to steady her voice again Babette had kissed her mother's forehead, and extended her arms to father and grandmother.

"I know it already—for a long time I have known—maman, papa, Nénaine," she said, laying her arms over the two bowed heads before her and hiding her face in her grandmother's bosom. "The night before I was taken ill it must have been," she said, presently; "for it is the last thing I remember, Arthé told me about—about her little sister and the white dress and blue tassels, and my heart beat so I could hardly listen. I knew it then, but I could not speak; and when I waked up everything was strange. I think I had fever. Then one day, not very long ago—about two weeks, I think—I waked again, and every one was to me as my own. And it seemed to me you knew, and then I rested and slept. I think I was weak. I was afraid to speak, lest it would all disappear; and while I kept still, you were always here. I was not quite sure whether it was true—or a dream. Only since yesterday I wanted to speak, knowing it would not vanish. And I saw in your

faces that you knew. How did you find it out, Nénaine, maman, papa? Was it the little dress?"

And then, helped to self-possession by the girl's calmness, they wiped their eyes and told all the story, and about the name in the blue tassels. Still, the whole mystery was not solved.

As soon as Babette was strong enough to undergo the ordeal, they sent for Clarisse and for Noute. And, of course, John was there and the little French priest.

The old woman only confirmed her previous story, the one Babette already knew. Indeed, it was all she could tell.

Noute did his very best, but, as before, whenever he appeared to be on the very edge of a revelation, his mind seemed to fail him utterly.

"Perhaps you could *take us to the place* where you lived on the beach," John suggested finally, as a last resort.

At this Noute jumped up and clapped his hands. "Yes," he could go there "*in a boat!*" And then, although it was very bad manners, he turned a double somersault in the presence of the entire company.

CHAPTER XIV

NOUTE'S evident faith in himself inspired his hearers with confidence, even though his enthusiasm was so grotesquely and characteristically expressed; and it was soon decided that the voyage of investigation should be attempted, at least.

It was thought best that Babette should go, too—in which case, of course, there would be a family party—as a return to the familiar scenes might revive her own recollections of her life there, and perhaps help to unravel her tangled story.

Of course Colonel Le Charmant would get a good boat, and there would be experienced sailors aboard who should obey Noute's instructions as to their course.

A novel journey it was to be, indeed, with Noute the foolish for *bona fide* captain, having officers and crew under him. Although its object was serious enough, there were others besides the blinking commander to whom it seemed little less than a pleasure excursion, even in anticipation.

The trip was necessarily deferred for several weeks until Babette should be quite well and strong, and in this interval there was probably never, in all the history of the old French city, a more popular convalescent than she.

The romantic, half-told story of the little creole girl, who had apparently dropped out of existence nearly sixteen years before, to return, an accomplished and beautiful young woman, to her own father's house, was told a hundred times a day on every street corner, and the fact that her restoration to her own people had come directly through her voluntarily sacrificing everything for a principle made her a heroine indeed.

Telegrams of congratulation had come in to the family daily from all over the land, even cabled messages from over the seas, ever since the day the news had gone abroad ; and Babette's own room had for weeks been a bower of roses. From all directions the floral offerings came : great pyramids of roses from the gardens of the Ursuline nuns below the city, and from the convent of the sweet sisters in Greenville ; flowers and congratulations from the Governor of the State and from the French Consul, and from strangers.

Of course there were always roses from Noute—little, short-stemmed damask-roses, choked up to their necks with a white string; or sometimes great branches, with a hundred Liliputian blossoms upon them, from the picayune rose-bushes in the old garden. Yet there were none more welcome.

Finally, the day of the journey arrived, and the party set sail for the unknown shore, where had lived the unknown woman who had played an unknown part in this mysterious chapter of Babette's life. Here Babette had lived—and Noute. From here she had come in an old woman's arms. This was all they knew.

All the Le Charmant family went—even the old grandmother, who had refused to enter any of these sailing craft for twenty years. She would see with her own eyes the roof that had sheltered the dear child; and if any harm should come to the little boat and its crew she would rather be with them than not.

Of course John was of the party, and the little priest, and one or two of the servants who had begged to go.

And of course, though Babette did not know it, there were among the crew two com-

missioned police-officers, with authority to arrest if the suspected persons should be found.

At the beginning of the journey all eyes were turned inquiringly upon "Captain Noute," as he was playfully called; but it was only a short time before he proved himself capable of the undertaking. He had not forgotten the way.

They had started in the gray of the early morning, and the sun was still above the horizon when the little boat took a landward course, and soon ran alongside a row of old decayed stumps—the remains of Nick's dilapidated wharf. As soon as the hut came into sight Noute was so delighted with his achievement that if there had been room upon the narrow deck he would certainly have performed a few of his lofty tumbles, and so the dignity of the captain was saved simply for lack of floor space. But he did a generous amount of grinning and blinking, and when at last the little boat was tied at the end of the rickety pier he could contain himself no longer, but, with a whoop, threw his hat high into the air. In its descent it fell upon the tip of the main-mast, where it remained for several minutes before a gust

of wind brought it down and carried it ashore.

Noute and his absurd antics had so engaged the attention of the company that they had as yet hardly noticed the aspect of the beach, and it was not until the men of the party had followed Noute along the wharf and were turning towards a clump of trees that they discovered the little cabin, almost hidden now by the dense growth of overhanging foliage.

Colonel Le Charmant advised the ladies to stay in the boat until they should "go ashore and investigate matters."

As the party neared the shanty they saw that a crowd was assembled in the little front room. Nick's wife stood at the door wiping her eyes upon her apron, and when Noute approached her and began to talk she covered her face in terror.

What Noute said was simply, "*Comment ça va!* W'ere's de ole woman?" Not a very gracious greeting this, but it was not addressed to a critical audience.

The woman kept her face in her apron, weeping afresh, and made no answer. But Nick, who stood beside her within the door, had heard the inquiry. He sullenly pointed

to a bed in the remote corner of the room. Here lay all that was left of the old gypsy. And she was dying.

Noute entered the room, followed by Colonel Le Charmant, the priest, and John.

As the old woman's eyes fell upon the well-remembered companion of her seafarings, and then upon him whom she recognized as the father of the stolen child, she threw up her bony hands in a gesture of terror and despair.

"Go quickly and bring Babette," said Colonel Le Charmant, turning to John McDonald.

Not a word was spoken as the visitors stood with uncovered heads by the bedside of death awaiting Babette's coming—not a word by the awe-stricken crowd at the door or the police-officers waiting without.

The dying woman was the only one who recognized Colonel Le Charmant; but Nick and his wife knew Noute, and his sudden appearance with an important-looking company seemed a menace. They were frightened. Only the old woman's fitful breathing, and an occasional muffled sob from her terrified, sorrow-stricken daughter, mingled with the

sighing of the pines and the lapping of the waves against the beach.

A broad shaft of the low evening sun came in through the open door, and, as Colonel Le Charmant turned presently and, meeting Babette, took her hand and led her to the old woman's bedside, this illuminating beam fell for a moment upon Babette's face. Whether it was this sudden lighting up of her features, or only seeing her beside her father, which told the story, we cannot know. But the gypsy understood. Raising her thin arms again, and turning her eyes towards heaven, she cried, in a thin, tremulous voice, "Thank God!" For some moments she was too much overcome to speak again; but presently, in a voice broken often by coughing, she confessed her awful crime.

"All these," she said, pointing to the tall, slatternly crowd of boys and girls standing about the door—"all these; they were little and hungry. I was old; it was for the reward—the money; but I was afraid. God forgive me!"

So much effort brought on a spell of exhaustion, and it seemed as if she might be dying.

"Say you forgive her, father," Babette plead, as, leaving his side, she went close to the bed and laid her hand gently upon the old woman's forehead.

The father could not resist this appeal. Stepping beside his daughter, and putting his arm around her, he said, in a voice in which there was no vestige of resentment, but only tender, human sympathy, "We forgive you. May God have mercy upon your soul!"

As she heard these words she clasped her hands and muttered some inarticulate words, but their sound was more of praise than of prayer. Perhaps even from the slough of sin and degradation into which she had fallen she had been praying for this sight—the stolen child restored to her father's arms—and even this extreme moment was to her an hour of rejoicing.

Colonel Le Charmant had turned away, and beckoned to the priest to come forward. At sight of him the old woman smiled and tried to speak. It was enough. The priest took his missal from his pocket, and, while every one fell upon his knees, began to read the prayers for the dying and the "absolution." He had heard the poor

"THIS ILLUMINATING BEAM FELL FOR A MOMENT UPON BABETTE'S FACE."





sinner's publicly made confession, and there was no time to stickle for form.

It was a half-hour later, perhaps, when, the religious services over, the visitors passed out of the little shanty. Stopping at the door for a moment's whispered conversation with her father, Babette returned to the old woman's bedside, and, slipping a roll of bills into her hands, turned and came away. A moment afterwards Nick's wife gently removed the money from the relaxed fingers, and dropped it into her pocket before Nick should see it. The old gypsy never knew that it was there.

"Well," said Colonel Le Charmant, as, walking beside the two police-officers, he followed the others back to the boat, "the Supreme Judge has taken this case out of your hands."

The spirit of the party as they set sail for home was very different from that of the morning. All day long gay songs and laughter had floated up into the wind that filled the white sail; but now, although the little boat skimmed gayly along in the evening breeze, no sound of merriment mingled with the ripple that followed her keel.

Colonel Le Charmant had instructed one

of the hired sailors aboard to assume command on the home journey; but before any one had realized it "Captain Noute" had donned the honors again, and he looked so happy as he stepped on deck and began unfurling the sail that it would have seemed cruel to depose him. And so he had his way.

As they steered out towards the channel Babette kept her eyes upon the shore. It seemed to have a sort of fascination for her—as a country visited in a dream.

All the people in the cabin had looked strange to her—even the old woman. The children of her memory were little girls and boys, their mother a pretty-faced woman holding a baby. She had never been able to recall a picture of her life on the shore here without this figure of a pretty woman sitting at the cabin door with a baby in her arms.

Everything was changed now. The pretty mother of the babes of eleven, twelve, and thirteen years ago was the gaunt middle-aged woman who stood sobbing within the door. The youngest of the long-ago babes was a strapping barefooted boy as tall as his father. Even the face of the beach

seemed changed and the expression of the cabin's front.

Volunteer clumps of tall, tufted pine saplings dotted the coast, breaking its old expanse, and the hovel had sent out patched additions to its architecture — "improvements" only in the sense of affording more sleeping space within.

The sounds and odors of the sea-shore alone were true to the past. Its waters lapped against the beach, and the winds moaned as of yore. Its breath was still redolent of the mingled odors of wet sands and drying pine-straw; its oyster-beds, half exposed now at low-tide; damp, oozing barnacles on the old wharf-stumps; the wind-shaken fish-nets.

Babette had never had any clear recollection of her life here; but when she had stepped upon the sands to-day with this identical breath of twelve years ago blowing into her face, stirring her hair, she was for a moment almost overcome with the vividness of the memory-pictures that came crowding before her eyes. And so she noted the changes. The visit had been more painful to the refined, sensitive girl than any one knew.

This was why, while the others talked of the pitiful story as the boat moved away, she sat silent, and gazed with tear-filling eyes at the little cabin door, lifted now into sight even in its shadowed place by a last lingering shaft of sunlight. This was why she was first to see, and to call to the others to look, where presently every one was seen to come out of the lighted cabin door — crying.

So it was that they knew that the old gypsy was dead.

The story is told. And yet this was some years ago. All the principal actors in the little history are still living, and living people's stories grow from day to day, whether they are written down or not.

Everybody who was in New Orleans in the winter of 1885 will remember the sensation produced in society by the *début* of Miss Babette Le Charmant. Stories of her beauty and accomplishments were on every tongue, and her romantic history was only an added attraction. Most marvellous tales were told even wherever a half-dozen common people talked together. As when one said, standing in the French market :

“An’ w’at you t’ink? Dey say all dat money w’at her fodder is pay her for teach her little sisters an’ brudders—dey say she is give every las’ *picayune* to doze low-down dagoes ’cross de lake, to bury dat old devil w’at stole her. W’at you t’ink about dat, eh?”

“Oh, well—me, I t’ink she must be one good Christian, yas. If it was me, I would let ’em pitch de old woman in de lake.”

“An’ me, too, I would. Anyhow, she *prove* she was one good Christian de way she *riffuse* to take dat Bondurante money. Me, I say, when somebody got a chance to grab some money and dey *riffuse* it—*so, just for principle, what nobody don’t know nutting about*—well, dat’s w’at I call *rilligion*!”

“An’ me, too. Dat’s true. Well, she got her reward in dis life. I b’lieve doze peop’ w’at try for reward for everyt’ing in dis worl’, dey don’t sometimes always get it, no.”

“Dat’s true. An’ maybe w’en dey look for it in heaven, dey find it dis side. Well, some people is lucky, anyhow. Dey say her fodder is give her one diamond chain for roun’ her neck wid t’irteen stone big like my little finger-nail!”

"Finger-nail! Ah, bah!"

"Like my *t'umb*-nail, yas! Dey say he is double all de expenses he been had for educate an' raise all de udder chillens an' put it in diamonds for her. W'at you t'ink?"

"Oh, well—I t'ink he is right. If I t'ought *somebody* would do me like dat, I would try to loss myself too."

"Yas, but *maybe* if you loss yo'self, you wou'n' find yo'self no more—eh?"

So, with good-natured pleasantry, the story passed from lip to lip.

For a long, happy year Babette's life was a gay round of social triumphs. The acknowledged belle of the old French city, she was the guest of honor at all gatherings—a pet with old and young alike.

The radiant little creole maiden, who had grown up within the four walls of a single square with only the companionship of a quaint old-fashioned family, with a serious intellectual student to direct her reading, was a novel product, as charming as she was unique. If her single popular "accomplishment" was playing the harp and singing the old-time songs of Madame Bondurante's youth, or Clarisse's folk-lore patois jingles,



"THE ACKNOWLEDGED BELLE OF THE OLD FRENCH CITY"

it was bewitching enough to turn all the young men's heads agog, even if her sweetness and beauty had not already done it.

With the more thoughtful she loved to discuss the old classics, or to naïvely express her own opinions upon the philosophers of the day—her familiar friends of old Dr. Bondurante's library.

Of course she had lovers by the score, who would have been glad to rob her father a second time. But though she called them all her friends, and in the atmosphere of devotion at home and abroad her story seemed to grow happier and sweeter every day, it remained for Somebody not a stranger to turn it into a love-story.

If this Somebody has not been mentioned very often during these last pages, it is not his fault, as he has been ever near, ever devoted, ever faithful to every promise of his early life. If he had tried very hard to turn her life into a love-story two years before, and to shield her from the life of poverty she had chosen, we have seen that he had not succeeded. The little maid would have her way then. But at last, after two years, with everybody's approval, the happy ending came to his long waiting, and there

was a great, grand wedding in the French quarter.

And then the story of Babette moved away up-town on the American side of the city, in the district of beautiful homes and spreading gardens. There, in a picturesque, beautiful house sitting in the midst of a great square, surrounded by lawns and flower borders, the story still goes on.

People driving past the house always look in, hoping to see the beautiful mistress sitting beside the white-haired grandmother within the rose-bowered balcony, as they are wont to do on summer evenings; and they often smile at the funny blinking fellow who tends the garden and sits grinning happily on the curbing while he turns the sprinkling-hose from one flower-bed to another.

Needless to say Noute is perfectly happy. As his head is "not much good for thinking," perhaps he does not realize that it was the timely thrust he gave the old gypsy many years ago, when he turned her into the Bondurante gate, that saved Babette's life, and his faithfulness to her afterwards in bringing her own to her that preserved the only unquestionable witnesses to her identity.

He knows, at least, that she is ever in sight, and safe and happy in the keeping of him whom he loves next best to herself.

For himself life holds every possible blessing, even to a perennial growth of vigorous cocoa-grass adown long garden-walks, to wage daily war upon. What more could he ask?

The Somebody of the love-story, already one of the most popular and successful young physicians of the South, is growing every year in professional reputation. He says he owes it all to Dr. Bondurante; but those who know him for himself, who esteem his high character and love his sympathetic presence in the sick-room, say that no man could have made him what he is.

Some of the greatest triumphs of his skill have been in the "Free Clinic," where poor sufferers, unable to pay in money, have gone away well and whole, blessing his name.

But the proudest day of his life was that on which the little creole girl whom he had gone to teach in the old French house added his name to her own.

THE END



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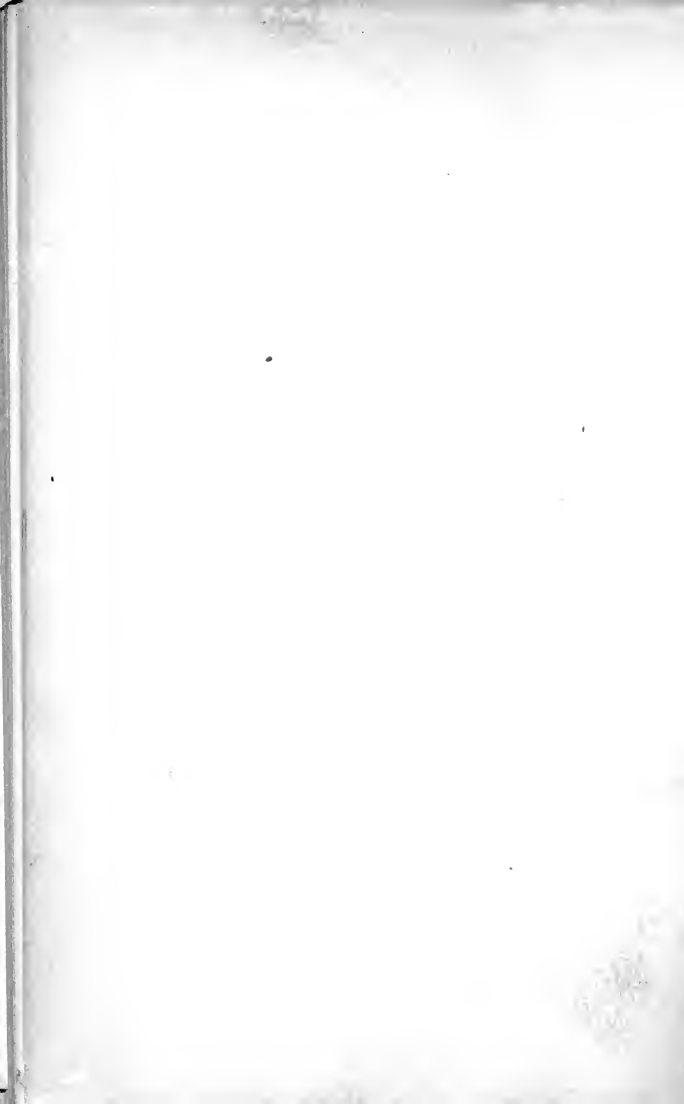
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